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Applying Reggio Inspired Practices in Virtual Early Childhood Contexts

by Andrea Dupree

When early childhood education is guided by an image of the child as capable and competent, are there any limits to the shape of the containers holding learning experiences?

My ongoing investigations around applying Reggio inspired practices in an all-virtual context continue to illuminate how widely applicable these ways of being with young children are. My experiences are continuing to affirm a strong image of the child, and hopefully will serve to further elevate the field of early childhood education and provide inspiration for expanded contextual possibilities, beyond simply sharing a recollection of pandemic-era education.

When everything changed in March 2020, I was working for a Reggio inspired school in New Orleans, which graciously supported faculty in the transition to distance learning. In spite of the incertitude of it all, my co-teacher and I took the news of looming pandemic lockdowns to heart early on and quickly formed plans for moving our classroom to the virtual realm. Our combined experiences as educators, along with her background as an actress and mine as a digital media artist, made for a harmonious shift to virtual learning alongside our class of 12 3-year-olds. This transition was also deeply informed by my appreciation of Fred Rogers' approach to

children's television programming. From March through May we offered our class multiple group and individual video chat meetings each day, along with opportunities for interaction through our class blog. Although the days were weighted with uncertainty, they were full of discovery, joy and laughter. Our class continued to connect through the explorations of stories, rainbows, birds, butterflies, and plants that we were engaged in prior to learning from home. We experienced virtual field trips together, and hosted guests who shared pets and fledgling gardens. So much symbolic and actual growth happened during that spring, and this complete immersion method of moving my teaching practice online proved to be career- and life-altering.

Like thousands of American educators and families, I became aware of my current context, Outschool, during the early days of the nationwide shift to distance learning in spring 2020. Founded in 2016, Outschool is an online learning platform providing learners ages 3-18 with educational opportunities beyond the regular classroom. The site functions as an AirBnB-style marketplace and virtual school, providing families with access to thousands of classes offered by independent educators. Classes take place in small groups over live video chat on Zoom, with opportunities for asynchronous interaction between live sessions. Outschool's core principles spark connections with Reggio inspired practices, as the company believes that choice empowers learners and social experiences enrich learning.

I made the shift to independent online teaching on Outschool during the summer of 2020, offering Reggio inspired learning experiences for ages 3-5 and yoga classes for all ages. My Reggio inspired experiences consist of groups of up to five children who meet up to three times a week, for 30 minutes at a time. Many of the children in these classes



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began in August and remained with me through the following summer, providing ample space for mutual growth in the process.

As many discovered in 2020, Zoom is a technological portal that affords access to experiences, with the potential to connect children, families, school, and the larger community. In my experience, young children behave the same in group learning on Zoom as they do in a physical context; they remain highly attuned to adults and thrive when met with respectful, responsive listening. The major difference between the contexts appears to stem from the influence of caregivers. Children who are offered complete autonomy or attend with a respectful, supportive caregiver consistently contribute to the group in ways that indicate empowered engagement. I believe that empowered engagement in a Zoom context looks like children in control of their mute button, body placement, and verbal and non-verbal contributions.

Technology has the potential to contribute to dynamic, content-rich learning environments that nurture collaboration and curiosity. Technological tools like Zoom afford incredible ways of connecting; however, like any tool, it takes time, effort, and interest to harmoniously incorporate into your toolbox. Just as I would prepare my in-person classroom before children arrive, I prepared my virtual classroom by becoming well-versed in all associated technology. In an all-virtual context, children's engagement with me, other children, and content is dependent on access to and/or familiarity with technology. I think that any challenges with regard to technology and young children primarily have to do with how comfortable adults are in their relationship with technology, and how adults define engagement. If we see technology as burdensome or something to be passively consumed, this mindset will most likely carry into how we model use with young children. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that virtual learning can be limiting for children without adult support, and even more so for children with special rights. Other issues of access to opportunities for virtual learning experiences include financial limitations, although this is something that Outschool is working to address through their financial assistance programs.

While Zoom is largely a tool contributing to the evolution of shared social learning, opportunities around using Zoom as an experiential tool for creative exploration are equally exciting. I regularly encounter child-initiated moments of experimentation with children investigating:

- The camera on their Zoom device in ways that include altering angle, placement and distance from it; modifying the distance between it and objects; and turning the camera on and off.
- The microphone on their Zoom devices including distance from it, volume, capturing the sound of objects, and turning microphone on and off.
- Annotation functions including drawing tools, emoji, and text.
- Virtual backgrounds and effects, including transforming video positioning and interacting with virtual elements in the Zoom video boxes.

Children naturally engage as active protagonists in their relationships with modern technologies, and when technology is intentionally included in learning experiences, opportunities for innovation and connection emerge. Technology and digital media are viable parts of the hundred languages through which I witness connections that are profound—such as sharing stories about the loss of family members and pets—joyful—such as sharing birthday and holiday celebrations—and every day, for example, describing the weather or favorite toys and foods. Zoom affords an almost magical ability to learn alongside participants from all over the world; for example, in one of my classes there are children simultaneously attending from the United States, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

The experience of participating in Zoom classes is in itself an experience in making learning visible. Children appear to be keenly aware of their likeness on the screen, and experiment with making adjustments by changing facial expressions, distance from the screen, and placement. These adjustments are perhaps also informed by what they are hearing from other participants. When I broadened my documentation practice to include recordings and screen grabs of Zoom meetings, I discovered subtle details of the group's actions and new ways of offering interaction with virtual content. In addition to offering visual documentation, during classes I verbally restate children's contributions in ways that communicate my curiosity and interest. I aim to further communicate respect by sharing content, invitations and provocations informed by the children's demonstrated interests. Since August 2020, the children in my context have engaged in child-initiated collaborative projects, including writing and reciting stories, creating drawings for books, and hands-on exploration of building, loose parts and art materials. We have explored an

incredible array of literacy, arts, social-emotional and STEM topics, all guided by the children's interests.

Child-originated, teacher-framed topic exploration in my Zoom classes typically begins with observation and verbal prompts. I note the children's actions, including objects and activities shared, and their responses to what is being shared by myself and others. I often ask, "What do you wonder about?" and "What do you want to know more about?" I then record their answers on small pieces of paper that I save and share with the group throughout our time together. Unexpected gifts in the form of child-led field trips often inspire joyful group explorations, such as when children share real-time car rides and trips to the mountains, beaches, parks, Disneyland, and farms. Goats, sheep, dogs, cats, rabbits, caregivers, and siblings are regular class guests, as well.

Family involvement is abundant on Outschool, and primarily connected to family members and caregivers serving as access points between children and learning experiences. They search for classes, choose and pay for a class, determine a schedule, provide the technology and assist the child with entering the virtual space. Many involve their children in the process of selecting a class, and sometimes participate alongside their children during the classes. In addition to these more access-oriented activities, family members and caregivers contribute valuable funds of knowledge as they share information about their children, families, and interests. Through these exchanges, the tenets of respectful, responsive listening guide my relationships with not only the children, but also their families and caregivers.

Regardless of context, a teacher is a compassionate learning partner who skillfully engages in dynamic practices that enrich lives. My teaching practice is rooted in love, respect, creativity, and a desire to facilitate authentic connections between people and concepts. These connections are adaptable to unique contexts and include emotional, intellectual, and creative connections between all participants and technology, materials, community, and nature. My view of the role of the teacher as dynamic, deeply reflective, and informed by an image of the child as capable and competent is what energizes my efforts in applying Reggio inspired practices to a learning context like Outschool.

While the future of distance learning is unclear, it seems unlikely to disappear. I recognize there are barriers to access to virtual learning spaces and notable differences between physical

and virtual, but I think there are exciting possibilities for merging the two. I imagine we will continue to see blends of virtual and physical contexts, perhaps through real-time engagement with "Zoom pen pals" and field trips. The possibilities for building relationships, connections and skills—for both children and adults—while experimenting and weaving together the life of the school, home, community and the world, are incredibly exciting.

Facilitating learning experiences rooted in Reggio inspired practices transcends context and proves that respectful relationships are the foundation of joyful education. I am so grateful for my learning alongside children and families, and I am eager to continue Reggio informed experimentation and innovation in the virtual space.