

## **Gather To-gather: The Practice of Revisiting in Living Inquiry Projects with Young Children**

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## ***Abstract***

*Reggio Emilia's pedagogy situates curriculum as a non-linear, relational, and indeterminate co-construction of meanings. Within this orientation to curriculum, revisiting includes recurrent and intentional gatherings between educators and small groups of children to attend to the documented processes that are foundational to the construction of projects. Analogous to the movement of a spiral, the practice of revisiting echoes the circular and non-linear nature of experimentation carried out in project work, as the children's constructs approach and recede, re-occur, expand, and intermingle. This paper seeks to animate a conversation about the practice of revisiting documentation with children, situating it as a force that nurtures and sustains long term co-constructed projects. To illustrate the process, I engage with excerpts from documentation composed of videos, photographs, and written notes. This documentation conveys the processes of living inquiry about an environmentally sustainable childcare building with a group of eight children. This paper is theoretically shaped by Reggio Emilia scholars and by William Doll's (2009) curriculum theory proposing criteria such as richness, recursion, and rigor to contest the fixities of a linear and predictable modern orientation to the curriculum. Doll situates curriculum as a process of looping and negotiating perspectives. These constructs highlight the tensions that are vital to living inquiry projects. As a place to attune to these tensions, I propose gatherings and revisiting with children as the nexus of living inquiry projects.*

**Keywords:** *revisiting, long term co-constructed projects, progettazione, living inquiry, the Reggio Emilia approach, recursion, whiling, early childhood curriculum*

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*It's like making a path through the forest. At first, it's rough going, with a lot of obstructions, but returning to it again and again, we clear the way. After a while, the ground becomes firm and smooth from being walked on repeatedly. Then we have a good path for walking in the forest.*

*(Chan as cited in Jardine, 2008, p. 1)*

Illustrated with excerpts of documentation of the nine-month co-constructed project with young children, this paper proposes the practice of revisiting explorations with children as the breath of living inquiry. The project started with an open exploration of a sustainable building that houses a childcare centre. This eco-sensitive building has mechanisms that harness solar energy and that cleans and repurpose wastewater. This inquiry was proposed and nurtured by two early childhood researchers in collaboration with the children's educators. The exploration morphed into an imaginative envisioning of the microorganisms that clean the water from toilet waste. Whereas further details about the bioreactor project will be presented later in this paper, I will first introduce an excerpt from documentation of this project to conceptualize the practice of revisiting while highlighting its affordances.



Mark, Mila and Alison<sup>1</sup> revisit the bioreactor panel

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<sup>1</sup> All children's names used in this paper are pseudonyms. The author has permission to share the children's images in this paper.

The small group of young children exploring the bioreactor mechanism of their sustainable childcare building gathered around the control panel, the documentation of previous encounters. This gathering elicited the following conversation amongst the children and the educator:

*Mark: Oh, do you know what I think about this? (looking at a picture of the bioreactor monitor panel with its symbols). Here is the toilet, and this is the dirty water. It goes to the clean water, comes back here, goes back here and there.*

*Elaine (educator): You showed us how the bioreactor works.*

*Mark: So, it flushes. It goes right here, pop, air. It says pop, it goes down here. Oh, I remember that. Oh! We are drawing the tank. (looking at the drawings of their theories about the functioning of the bioreactor tank).*

*Mathew: We are hearing the tank (the photo of the children and educator laying on the tank*

*Mark: Do you know what I think? I think that the orange things are actually the animals [microorganisms].*

*Elaine (educator): Pointing at the photograph: "Let's look at the orange things. These ones? Humm...do you agree with Matthew that the orange things are the animals?"*

*Mila: No, they are food.*

*Alison: I think that they are dirt from the toilet. Someone ate orange stuff.*

This gathering illustrates the integral practice of revisiting experiences with children as a recursive encounter with the process of living inquiry projects. Such encounters prompt experiences of remembering, reflecting, (re)interpreting, and reconnecting with others (Doll, 2009). A culture of co-participation is evidenced in the conversation, for Mark, more than once exclaims: "*Do you know what I think?*" Invited by the researcher, Mila and Alison articulate their perspectives. Mila proposes a different

interpretation. The orange material floating inside the tank is unbroken food particles. Alison furthers Mila's theory by adding the source of the substance (human waste from the toilet). These constructs were fomented by the documentation affixed on the wall eliciting memory. Also, revisiting was eventualized by this recurrent encounter with the panel.

Before delving into the particularities of revisiting, I will elucidate curriculum making within the practice of documentation-informed living inquiry. Next, I will briefly describe the bioreactor project while illustrating some significant events that nurtured the circular movement of the project. Within the practice of living inquiry, gatherings to revisit experiences is integral to the long term co-constructed projects.

### ***The Practice of Revisiting in Progettazione /Living Inquiry Projects***

Often interpreted as emergent curriculum projects in North American contexts, Reggio Emilia pedagogy situates co-constructed projects with children as *progettazione*:

By project work (*progettazione*), I mean work in which adults (teachers, atelierista, pedagogista) make initial hypotheses and seek to have a deeper understanding of an area or topic but where key elements for moving forward come from work with the children, and careful analysis by adults of what is happening along the way. Greater importance is given to some parts of a project than others, to images and thoughts slowly emerging in the children and which require agreements based on reflection and mediation, between the wishes and thoughts of the children and those of the teachers to decide which pathway is most opportune to follow. Choices must not betray the thinking of the children or the nature of the theme we are working on. (Vecchi as cited in Dahlberg & Moss, 2010, p.xx)

Revisiting explorations with children convey the educators' attempts to attentively interpret the children's constructs. It also communicates to the children that uncertainty is valued. This process cultivates a culture of listening to differences as a way of knowing and being (Rinaldi, 2016). On this account, Davies (2014) borrows from Berlant to propose that in this space of mutuality the participant "[b]ecomes a poet of the episode" (p. 4). The children experience the essentiality of their unique and imaginative participation. Mutuality is also envisioned in the curriculum orientation of living inquiry proposed by the British Columbia Early Learning Framework:

Living inquiries” is used to describe the processes of thinking and learning that happens as children, educators, materials, and ideas interconnect. The term “living” suggests that these processes are ongoing and always evolving. “Inquire” means to pay attention in multiple ways – to study, explore, experiment, and ask questions. (Government of British Columbia, 2019, p. 75)

The orientation to the curriculum as living inquiry is furthered by Meyer (2006) as “an inquiry into how to live with the quality of awareness that sees newness, truth, and beauty in daily life” (p.11). In line with this definition, Jardine (2002) contends:

[i]nquiry does not begin with a psychological and pathological version of differences, where each child has their own cultural, linguistic, personal and familial background, experiences, abilities, level, previous knowledge, intelligence (Gardner 2000). Rather, inquiry imagines a topic as a living topography, a living, interrelated place full of its own diversity, relations, multiplicity, history, ancestry, and character. The question then is, what topics can be pursued in the classroom that has enough richness and complexity to embrace the full range of children and teachers’ work? Rather than beginning with difference and then doling out different pieces of topic, inquiry asks how we might take a class full of difference to a living place that can invite them all. (Jardine, 2002, para.3)

As proposed by Jardine (2002), “topics” of inquiry materialize as a gathering of varying perspectives engendered by the communal life of children, teachers, and materials. This echoes the concept of curriculum as *progettazione* of the Reggio Emilia approach, wherein curriculum cannot be laid out and followed; rather, it presupposes the construction of flexible interpretations about the children’s constructs, insights, questions, and interests (Rinaldi, 2006). It also takes into consideration the vision of the educators nurtured and decided upon in processes of collaborative dialogue with other educators (Rinaldi, 2006). This process situates curriculum composition as a search for affinities within difference. By studying and discussing documentation of children’s processes of experimentation, educators make proposals to the children based on their interpretations. In this context, educators decide on a provisional orientation that they find response worthy. What follows is a brief description of the bioreactor project to illustrate processes of revisiting experiences within the context of living inquiry.

### ***A Living “Topic”: The Building with a Bioreactor***

Inspired by the Reggio Emilia vision of *progettazione* and by the concept of living inquiry in the British Columbia Early Learning Framework, the bioreactor project stemmed from the curriculum vision of sustainability espoused by the architectural features of the building housing the childcare centre. As well, the inquiry reflected the pedagogical vision of eco-sensitivity of the complex and interconnected relationships between humans and nature (Macdonald, 2015).

One of the features of the building is a bioreactor mechanism that includes an indoor electronic panel and an underground outdoor tank populated by live bacteria that recycles wastewater from the bathrooms. The recycled water is then repurposed for toilet use and watering plants. The sustainable building invited many visitors, sparking interesting conversations about the innovative space with high ceilings, tall windows, and a loft. In conversations with the educators, the researchers decided to explore the building with the intent to listen to the children’s perspective about the space. Their valuable perspective was missing from the conversations taking place about this innovative building design. I started by encountering the building as a group, moving to its vast spaces, exploring it by touching and by rubbing different surfaces. From the beginning, I was open to the possibilities of encounters with the building. Given that the focus of this paper is on the revisiting practice that anchors inquiry projects, I will only give a brief account of a few encounters that nurtured the project to contextualize revisiting.

The inquiry started by encountering the building as a group, moving in its vast spaces and by sensing it, touching, and rubbing different surfaces. The children also listened to the walls, climbed columns, and paid visits to the loft.



Experiencing the building by climbing its column



Exploring the high loft

After a few weeks of deep listening to the building, Mitchell brought to my attention his drawing theorizing the functioning of the bioreactor mechanism. The children's educators suggested participants for the inquiry that represented a variety of ages, dispositions, and interests. Mitchell's drawing was introduced to a few children in a gathering that the researchers organized. The children received this invitation with curiosity, conveying that they too were wondering about the lights in the bioreactor panel that Mitchell brought to attention. The drawing became the genesis of an eight-month inquiry about the bioreactor, which later culminated in drama and stories about the microorganisms that clean wastewater. The children drew their observations and theories. They also explored the tank and composed their renderings of the microorganisms with clay; they also posed and enacted their envisioning of these beings.



Mitchell sharing his drawing with the researcher



These invitations to the children were designed through collaborative dialogue with the co-researcher and at times with the educators. By studying the documentation of these encounters, the researchers, and the educators, formulated these questions to initially orientate the inquiry: “How do the children perceive this building? How do they move in this space? How do they encounter each other in their vast spaces? These explorations were carried out by embracing Malaguzzi’s concept of *a hundred languages*, visual and performative media to think with to explore topics, interests, questions, and concepts (Forman & Fyfe, 2012, p. 258). These authors contend that

[an] investigation uses the original encounter to give continuity to the various encounters and to maintain a high level of emotional engagement. The children continually revisit new encounters to relate them both to the original encounter and planned possibilities”. (Forman & Fyfe, 2012, p. 260)

As one of the many encounters, we invited the children to draw their renderings of microorganisms. Later after they revisited each others’ drawings to notice the variety of constructs. The subsequent drawings became more complex, bigger in size, as the children selectively added their peers’ perspectives to their own drawings. Revisiting became the place where we found mutual affinities with the “topic” of our project: the sustainable building with tall columns, the textured walls, and floors; the buttons for the alarms and the panels; the noisy and foul-smelling tank, and the invisible beings that the children continuously brought to life through their stories.



Mitchel, Mila, Alison and Clare conceptualize the microorganisms through drawing

From my perspective, gatherings to gather and revisiting encounters, situate the educators as co-searchers and co-actors with the children, a disposition that is essential to experimentation (Rinaldi as cited in Davies, 2014). The practice of revisiting enacts as the

“imaginative space of engagement” for children and educators, conveying a “situation of multiple implications” (Davies, 2014, p. 13).

### ***Ways to Practice Revisiting***

Revisiting documentation with children was pivotal to the composition of the bioreactor project. It made it visible to the children that something “big” was at play. On this account, it moved us to continue experimenting. Within the unforeseen and unavoidable interruptions in the flow of our experimentation, revisiting animated the project that at times seemed static. Although pauses are inherent to this process (Rinaldi, 2006), revisiting became the spiral that kept us spinning, orbiting around our reckonings, keeping the project alive.



Margaret Macdonald, the co-researcher revisits the encounter with the tank through photo elicitation.

As a practice to reconnect, relive, and recompose meaning, revisiting can take multiple forms. In the context of the bioreactor project, revisiting was experienced as:

- gatherings with small groups of children and the educators to attend to particularities of the project and to make proposals for further work;
- conversations between two children at a time to take up knots in their understandings and to encounter similarities and differences in their constructs;

- display of documentation physically or electronically for proposed or spontaneous visitations by children, educators, and parents;
- creating traces of living memories on the classroom walls to show the trajectory of the project and to nurture children's engagement;
- children's reconnection with their drawings and processes with multimodal languages;
- ongoing overhead projection (on walls) of photographs to support memory elicitation.

These revisiting practices interconnect the various components of the living inquiry process. The intentional practice to gather is essential to the co-cultivation of living inquiries projects with young children. Educators must attune to this ongoing practice of interpreting and re-interpreting ideas and actions, assumptions, and experimentation to fuel the movement of curriculum that cultivates a culture of inquiring, which is “relational, plural and emergent” (Davies, 2014, p. xii). This paradigm aligns with William Doll's postmodern orientation to the curriculum in that “[it] is generated, not predefined, indeterminate yet bounded” (Doll, 2009, p. 268). I will now situate revisiting within William Doll's curriculum theory that endorses the processual, provisional, imaginative and relational tenets of living inquiry, as a disruption to the fixities of the modern conception of the curriculum. In this regard, Doll (2009) proposes that

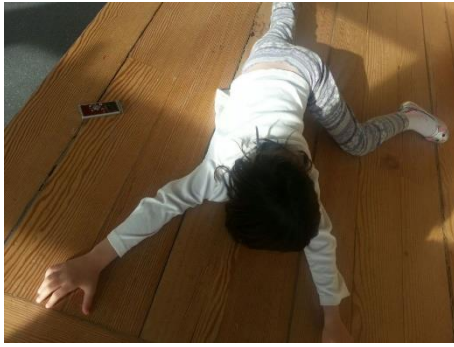
[m]odernism has not adopted such an interrelational view; it has taken as one of its hallmarks movement beyond the local and contextual to the universal and abstract. Instead of the narrational, it has aimed for, indeed created, the metanarrational, the grand écrit Lyotard attacks. Teachers, fitting unconsciously into this paradigm—as we all do—have unwittingly carried on their discourses with students by speaking ex-cathedra. Too often, teacher explanations have resounded with the authority of God; too rarely have meaningful, interactive, participating dialogues been held. (Doll, 2009, p.258)

The discussion that follows introduces Doll's proposed criteria for disrupting “the grand écrit”, or the certainty, linearity, fragmentation, and individualization inherent in the conventional modern orientation to the curriculum.

### ***The Rs of Revisiting Living Inquiry: Richness, Recursion, Relation, Rigor***

Doll (2009) disrupts the quintessential modernist curriculum expressed in the Tyler Rationale in its vision of planning, delivery, and evaluation. This rationale fueled the standardization of curriculum, which contradicts the generative uncertainties of co-composed inquiry-based projects with children. Doll (2009) contests the three R's emphasized in the Tyler rationale: Reading, "Riting" and "Rhitimetic" (p. 22) to propose the four criteria of *richness*, *recursion*, *relations*, and *rigor*. Doll's contentions evoke the previous discussion about the non-linearity and unpredictability of co-constructed projects in the context of living inquiry. In what follows, I situate the practice of revisiting within the criteria of richness, recursion, and rigor.

*Richness* is proposed as an affordance of post-modern orientations to curriculum "layers of meaning" and interpretation (Doll, 2009, p. 268). Within *progettazione*, *richness* stems from this very possibility of engaging with uncertainty; the educator does not plan the curriculum ahead from beginning to end. Perceived as a lack of control, Doll (2009) posits that this tension conveys the vitality of curriculum, for the educator is called to respond in unpredictable ways within new contexts. In the context of the bioreactor project, documentation of the process conveyed disorientation amidst the possibilities for responses that our collaborative work engendered. I recall an instance when the children watched the video about sustainable building hoping to see the microorganisms that they imagined. On this account, in discussion with the centre's educators, we considered taking the children to the university science lab for a microscopic encounter with bacteria. However, we focused on the imaginative embodied renderings that were taking shape. The children's dramatization and storying of the microorganisms did not seem to call for a different experience beyond a few props added to their dramatizations. We returned to the stories that the children were composing as they pretended to be bacteria.



Jay and Amanda embody their renderings of the microorganism: slithering like a snail and jumping like a frog.

### ***Recursion***

Thinking with Bruner, Doll (2009) defines *recursion* as a process of detaching oneself from knowing in order to reflect on the experience. Bruner conceptualizes recursion in the curriculum as a “spiraling” or a “looping of thoughts on thoughts” (Doll, 2009, p.269). Revisiting is a context for the looping of thoughts. It renders our thinking visible and thus susceptible to movement, contestation, and transformation. The spiral evokes that meaning making has no beginning or an end. It is always in motion.

Educators favor interconnections, inviting children to think in relation to people, ideas, and materials. The practice of revisiting work with children renders visible the thoughts and representations of a child to herself and to her peers; this generates tension and the possibility of renewed understandings. For instance, in the bioreactor project, the children revisited the photos of their peers enacting microorganisms as a snail, a frog, and other insects. Later when they enacted bacteria and started storying their lives in the tank, their individual movement of slithering, swimming, leaping, and crawling progressively became collective. Revisiting photos inter-animated their conceptualizations. Intuitively, the children synchronized and repeated similar movements. In a way, the children detach from the doing to attune to what may not have been noticed otherwise. I contend that the convening of children and educators to gather infuses a certain formality to the process, spacing for the listening to self and others. This becomes a way of life, a predisposition to embrace “a whiling that seeks the worth of that whiling” (Jardine, 2008, para.3).

Doll (2009) pinpoints another affordance of recursion as a space to bring attention to particularities and ask questions. During our gatherings, we would voice the perspective

of one child to invite the engagement of other children. After visiting the drawings displayed on a platform in the middle of the room, we proposed that the children showed their peers how their bacteria moved. Mark volunteered to show us his conception of a bacteria, slithering like a snail. Zina, Amanda, and Alison enacted their envisioning of bacteria jumping, crawling, slithering, and swimming. These embodiments of bacteria were introduced by photo elicitation of their posing as bacteria. Later, as the children played microorganisms an inter-animation of movement was perceived; one microorganism would move in a variety of ways. This way the children complexified their initial renderings.

Doll (2009) disrupts the modernist perspective on *rigor* in the certainty of purely scientific logic to advance a notion of *rigor* as incompleteness, doubt, and varied interpretation. This way, revisiting makes visible the teacher's intention to challenge understandings and animate conversations. The teacher seeks to attend to the children's constructs, highlighting openings, contradictions, and similarities (Edwards, 2012). Doll (2005) situates this action as a *negotiation of passages*:

Rigor here means the conscious attempt to ferret out these assumptions, ones we or others hold dear, as well as negotiating passages between the assumptions, so that the dialogue may be meaningful and transformative..... in this dialogue there is a combining of determinacy and indeterminacy. (p. 271)

Following this line of thought, I situate revisiting as an evocation of rigor, as it nurtures a listening context, explained by Carlina Rinaldi (2006):

[In] *re-presenting* our theories, we “re-know” or re-cognize” them for making it possible for our images and intuitions to take shape and evolve through action, emotions, expressiveness, and iconic and symbolic representations (the “hundred languages”). Understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue. (pp.65-66)

In the bio-reactor project, revisiting was the spinning to find ways within the spiraling of various possibilities that living inquiry engendered. We wrapped up the investigation of the bioreactor in the summer as many of the children would be leaving the childcare centre to start kindergarten in the Fall. We could have continued the project, for the practice of revisiting kept it flowing. Within the various processes of the co-constructing curriculum with children that educators may undertake, I claim that revisiting

is a foundational practice of gathering to gather; as such I propose that educators seek an orientation to curriculum that makes space for “unsettling reciprocity” (Davies, 2014, p. 25). As the nexus of living inquiry, I emphasize to cultivate a culture of inquiry that attends to the stories that unfold in the *quotidian* of early childhood educational contexts.

As previously stated, revisiting shapes various paths of curriculum making as living inquiry. Returning to the quote that opened this discussion about revisiting as a foundation practice of living inquiry, revisiting

is like making a path through the forest. At first, it’s rough going, with a lot of obstructions, but returning to it again and again, we clear the way. After a while, the ground becomes firm and smooth from being walked on repeatedly. Then we have a good path for walking in the forest. (Chan as cited in Jardine, 2008, p. 1)

Herein lies an invitation to take up the practice of revisiting as the recursive movement to create paths of co-attention, participation, deliberation, and inter-animation of voices. Revisiting does not make the curriculum path easier, but it makes it richer with meaning, for in returning to gather and move together, educators and children negotiate passages to co-compose living inquiry projects with children. Revisiting is indeed a “good path” for waking the forest of curriculum making.



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