

# *Illness and the Concept of Aesthetic Responsiveness In Early Childhood Education*

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What does a concept of “aesthetic responsiveness” offer to our understanding of the dynamics of teaching and learning about or from conflict? And what can it mean to live creatively as a teacher in the midst of suffering? To what extent is it possible to offer a disposition of aesthetic responsiveness in the midst of suffering? And what might young children understand and contribute in the midst of such difficulty? We offer these questions within a context of *emergent curriculum* as an enactment of curriculum inquiry. Emergent curriculum can be thought of as providing opportunities for inquiries to emerge from the lived experiences of those who embody it. Enacted in the shared relationships among educators, children and their families, emergent curriculum can generate a disposition that we are calling aesthetic responsiveness. In this paper we wonder about the conditions and limits offered up by aesthetic responsiveness in times of trauma. We share what this disposition might offer for the field of curriculum

inquiry. First, we wish to show you what we mean, provisionally, by a concept of aesthetic responsiveness<sup>1</sup> as an attitude or disposition to coping with trauma. Second, we offer moments in a story of suffering in an early childhood setting that might illuminate our questions. Third, we engage with ecologist Gregory Bateson's notion of "patterns which connect" (1979) as a disposition of aesthetic responsiveness. We take up Bateson's understanding of the aesthetic as *an encounter that is attuned in recognition, appreciation and empathy in the moment of experience*. We gesture to this Batesonian understanding of the aesthetic as a way to make sense of the experience of trauma in the context of early childhood education. Our intention to engage with the thinking of Bateson and with the practices of the Reggio Emilia approach is an opportunity to contribute to a broader field of phenomenological and relational pedagogies.<sup>2</sup> We conclude by wondering about the practices in teacher education that might cultivate spaces for aesthetic responsiveness.

To introduce a notion of aesthetic responsiveness we turn first to music, and the aesthetic dimension as a search for aural beauty, as in the work of instrument maker Keith Hill, known for his reproduction of period violins and harpsichords. How did Hill create such gorgeous sounding instruments, when other instrument makers could not reproduce as beautifully the sound of period instruments? Others said old instruments sounded beautiful *because* they were old; nonsense, Hill said, there are terrible sounding period instruments (Hill, n.d.). He set out to research how to recreate the most beautiful sounds associated with the greatest period instruments. Behind everything we do is a question, says Hill, and behind every question, an attitude. He believed that, if he could deduce the attitude, he could reproduce the sound.

I build my instruments with the sole aim of creating sounds that enhance and support (meaning to make reasonable, logical, and beautiful) a highly expressive, flexible, affective, powerfully communicative yet balanced

style of playing. Playing that is, in a word, soulful. (Hill, n.d.)

In our paper, we bring Hill's aim together with the aims of early childhood educators who work with emergent curriculum. Emergent curriculum is a search to create highly-responsive lived experience created jointly by children, educators, and families participating in collaboration (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012; Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Wien, 2008). And when the attitude of the educators is one of aesthetically motivated responsiveness, the tonal quality in a setting changes; the attitude is palpably different from mainstream early childhood programs.

In our view, aesthetic responsiveness carries four qualities that together create a particular and recognizable tonal quality in any classroom. These four qualities are authenticity, attentiveness, appreciation, and empathy. Authenticity requires a sense of genuineness, an educator acting without pretense or guile. It is a quality of integrity or honesty recognizable to young children. Attentiveness we see as a suspension, an inclination to wait, to be open rather than rushing to act or correct; it is an openness to others that withholds judgment. While easy to say, it is much more difficult to practice as an educator. Appreciation is a stance that is positive, an accepting response, a sort of embrace of events. The appreciative is one aspect that gives the term "aesthetic" its meaning when speaking of responsiveness. [We work later with a wider sense of the term aesthetic.] Empathy is a feeling of being with another, of cherishing them, offering care. Each of these has a long history and it is not the place of this paper to repeat that here. For our purposes, though, it is necessary to note that these qualities can become dialogic. Liora Bresler (2008) for example, notes in her intriguing article on what music has to offer arts research that empathy is dialogic. When offered to another, we believe, empathy invites a response in tune with its tonal quality. In fact, we argue that all four qualities –

authenticity, attentiveness, appreciation and empathy – are dialogic, so that these qualities, when offered, begin to reverberate. They carry energy, the energy of affect. Let us show you what we mean.

Jason Avery, an educator at the *Together with Families Program at Mohawk College* in Hamilton, Canada, sees two children at a bead-stringing table. He responds to this interaction through an intentional act of attentiveness -- the act of documentation, which is a careful “tracing” of the sets of relations in children’s activity. The practice originated in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and now is practiced widely in early childhood contexts around the world. Materializing in public displays of documents (photographs and visual/audio tapes, written descriptions, examples of children’s work), documentation is an intentional act of “reconnaissance” or of making children’s thinking (and the adults’ thinking who work alongside with them) visible. Jason is attentive to Miles’s intention in bringing a pipe to the table. Many educators might correct the child at this point, suggesting that he return the pipe to its original location in the classroom. But Jason asks himself, “What does Miles want to know? A pipe is a container, a conduit. Should I have a conversation with Miles about pipes?” He writes in his documentation: “Miles joyfully explores the combination of beads and pipes. He is able to peer down the tube to see the bead he has inserted. He has heard it skitter its way along the pipe.” Jason continues, “Whether skipping rocks on a pond or sailing a disc through the air or sending a bead through a pipe, there is something of beauty in setting a thing in motion and watching it go” (Avery, personal communication).

First we have the child’s implicit question – what happens if I put a bead down the pipe? Then we have the educator’s question – what does Miles want to know? We believe the attitude, the tonal quality is a dialogic authenticity – attentiveness to the situation, appreciation for it, and empathy shared between adult and child – and to these qualities simultaneously present we are giving the term aesthetic responsiveness.

The child's tacit question or research, and the educator's inquiry are co-dependent, for where would the adult's question be if there was no chance for the child to show his interest, and where would the child's question be if there were no interest in his ideas by his educators?

Emergent curriculum is the idea that "educational experience...consists of practice and careful reflection that is continually readjusted" (Gandini, 1993, p. 5) to the changing context of learning. Changes are results of observations, conversations, research through careful documentation of thinking and learning, and multiple (re-)visitations co-created from the relations of lived experience (Wien, 2008). Children and adults are seen as co-participants in the enactment of emergent curriculum. A shift in perception from components to interactive, and interacting, dynamics puts the emphasis on the kinds of relationality that different nested relationships have with one another, rather than only on the individual components that make up larger wholes. With this understanding of emergence, knowledge becomes less something that is acquired, built, stored, processed or assimilated; it rather becomes that focuses on connecting dynamic relations.

An aspect of the attentiveness of educators is their creation of pedagogical documentation from ethnographic materials such as photos of children in activity, transcripts of what was said, samples of what children make, and the construction of composites for analysis and interpretive study with others (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012; Fleet, Patterson & Robertson, 2006). Barbara Sellers-Young, Dean of Arts at York, at a presentation of research in her faculty, called the arts "modes of reflection." Pedagogical documentation is for practitioners of emergent curriculum a mode of reflection, an aesthetic artifact. Emergent curriculum has several sources, in the work of Westcoast educators such as Elizabeth Jones, for example, (Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Jones, 2012) and particularly in the inspiration of the Reggio Emilia experience, from the city of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy (Edwards, Gandini & Forman,

2012). Its influences centre around Dewey, Vygotsky, and Bruner, Bateson and systems and complexity theory, and more recently, philosophers of aesthetics such as Mauro Ceruti, with the argument that “epistemology and aesthetics are synonymous” (Ceruti as cited in Vecchi, 2010).

### Experiencing Trauma: A Story from Peter Green Hall Children’s Centre

Thus far we have tried to show what a disposition of aesthetic responsiveness means in emergent curriculum in early childhood education. But what might it mean in a situation of threat, of suffering and trauma? What does it mean to authentically engage an experience that involves the risk of loss? What if empathy, in its attunement to the risk of loss, threatens to disturb the boundaries we use to protect the self from pain? In a series of events from the experience of Peter Green Hall Children’s Centre—events we recognize may be connected in significantly different ways for each of the people experiencing them—we attempt to make sense of and find relevance in what it may have been like to make meaning during a time of physical, psychic and pedagogical suffering. Following is a short narrative describing the context of the events to which we are referring in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

The context of the story to which we refer in this paper is a day and after-school centre for children of 91 families, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Carol Anne Wien has had a relationship with the centre as a friend and mentor for some 18 years, introduced them to Reggio-inspired practice, and engages in reflection with staff, writing about their work (e.g., Wien, Keating, West, Bigelow, 2012). Over a period of 12 years, the centre has reinvented all its systems, moving from a theme-based curriculum to developmentally appropriate practice then to emergent curriculum and a view of children and adults as strong, active participants of learning.

One September, an educator, Bobbi Lynn Keating, who works with four to five-year-old children, was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma. The centre staff was distraught and Bobbi raced to think through how to cope with the illness with the children. In the midst of the turmoil, this is how she describes her experience:

I was propelled into a club of pink ribbons I wanted no part of. I was flooded with emotions—shock, fear, sadness, resentment, anger. When I thought of the children I work with, I thought surely they would notice my breast gone, my hair loss. What would I tell them? In the midst of my panic, I had a moment of clarity. Why would I treat this topic any different from anything else? We dealt with difficult topics before—a knee surgery, and the death of a family pet. I believe children are capable, ready to engage, to learn. (Wien, Keating, West, and Bigelow, 2012, 13)

Seeing education as a relational place, Bobbi decided to invite the disease into relation with her work life. The centre took two precautions: one was to meet with staff and families to negotiate whether sharing her experience was acceptable. The families were fully supportive. Second, Bobbi decided not to use the powerful word cancer with the children, but to speak of diseased tissue that had to be removed.

The sensitive invitation into the life of the community of the traumatic experiences of one of its members is an example of emergent curriculum enacted. It may have been easier, and more typical, to see the trauma of Bobbi's cancer as exogenous to the academic and socially sanctioned learning that *should* go on in a child care setting. Indeed, one of the first instincts of many at the centre was to hesitate in the face of what parents might say or children would be capable of doing (Wien, et. al., 2012, 13). Yet, by refusing the script of the pre-planned or typical curriculum, this child care setting invited the experiences that all the co-

participants—without a clear sense of what is to come next or an agenda to be satisfied—could co-construct as emergent curriculum.

Bobbi's approach was authentic and attentive to her context, but in what sense could there be said to be any appreciation or empathy? How could anyone "appreciate" breast cancer or find empathy toward an event that brings such suffering and potential othering?

### Trauma and Aesthetic Patterns which Connect

Gregory Bateson's work on "patterns which connect" is offered up as a possible response to these questions. A strong critic of reductionist and fragmentary approaches, Gregory Bateson conceived of epistemology as "an indivisible, meta-science" (Bateson, 1979, p. 93) that accounts for mutual causality and relationality (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 36). In 1977, Bateson was writing what he thought would be two books, one *The Evolutionary Idea*, the other, *Every Schoolboy Knows*. As he worked on the two manuscripts, he intuited that in both evolution and learning, there is "a single learning which characterizes evolution as well as *aggregates* of humans" (Bateson, 1979, p. 4). Bateson (1979) asked, "How does a hand know how to grow and stay the same shape" (p. 4)? How does a starfish know "how to grow into five-way symmetry" (p. 4)? And "what pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you" (p. 8)?

Bateson saw the pattern that connects together apparently disparate creatures as an *aesthetic*—an encounter that is attuned in recognition, appreciation and empathy. In what is now perhaps one of his most poignant evocations, he saw this knowing as responsiveness to "the pattern which connects" (p. 8). Beginning from the observation that, in evolutionary terms, there appears to be a pattern that connects organisms temporally and spatially, Bateson was convinced that there is "an ultimate unifying beauty" (p. 19) – what he called a meta-pattern or



“a pattern of patterns” (p. 11) – which is the basis of all relationality. Nowadays when we think of the term pattern, he argued, we tend to imagine static pictures frozen on a medium or surface, like images on a piece of cloth. Any artist would trouble that perception of pattern, yet this static notion is still typically taught in schools.

It is easier and lazier that way but, of course, all nonsense.

In truth, the right way to begin to think about the pattern which connects is to think of it as *primarily* (whatever that means) *a dance of interacting parts* and only secondarily pegged down by various sorts of physical limits and by those limits which organisms characteristically impose.

(Bateson, 1979, 13, *emphasis added in second italics*)

Pattern as a dance of interacting parts is analogous to the formation, continuation and sustainability of life; it is an ever-evolving dance that manifests itself in the constant evolutionary interaction, reproductive and otherwise, between different related living organisms.

For Bateson (1979), this “patterns of relations” (p. 33) is thus fundamentally an epistemological pattern connecting all items of learning. It links not only how human beings come to know, but also how the “starfish and the redwood forest... [learn] to grow into five-way symmetry...[or] to survive a forest fire” (Bateson, 1979, p. 4). It is a pattern that is the basis of all perception and knowledge. Following the Kantian tradition, Bateson adheres to a view that we can never know the world or the thing as it really is. In short, the thing in itself “can never enter into the communicational world of explanation” (Bateson, 1991, pp. 165-166) in that what is noticed is not the thing in itself but emergent differences that announce themselves through relational ties with other differences. It is the relations or *patterns which connect* different elements that are noticed, and are thus subject to knowing.

The relation among different dynamics is perceived as “news of difference” (Bateson, 1979, p. 74) – that is “a *difference which makes a*

*difference*” (Bateson, 1972, p. 453, emphasis in original). It seems commonsensical that it takes a relation between two things to make a difference. It also makes sense that this difference, as a relation among different dynamics, is a source of knowledge or information through which living organisms are able to environmentally negotiate and navigate. According to Bateson then, it is this relationship among dynamics that gives rise to the ways living organisms know—about themselves and others in the world. To put it another way, for Bateson, knowledge entails learning how one “thing” connects to another, and not what something *is* in itself. The basis of knowing, then, is an aesthetic sensibility.

Bateson (1991) also viewed the environment and the organism that participates with it as a single self-generating system. Defining a system as “any unit containing feedback structure and therefore competent to process information” (p. 260), he likened larger systems to those that incorporate the interdependent relationship that an organism shares with its environment. In the same way that there are ecological and social systems, he wrote: “The individual organism *plus* the environment with which it interacts is itself a system” (p. 260). For this reason, Bateson (1972) contended that living organisms, including human beings, are not simply autonomous individuals vying for scarce resources in their surroundings, but are more ecologically understood as environmentally-embedded systems co-existing with others—that is, organism *plus* environment (p 451). The concept of organism-plus-environment allowed Bateson to theorize a notion of self as expansive beyond mind, incorporating somatic bodily ways of knowing. His understanding, however, goes further by contending that self is not “limited by the skin” (p.454), but extends to include the environment of which it is *necessarily* part of. Bateson was convinced that there is an underlying pattern that connected all living organisms with their surroundings and that the health of this environment is integral to the well-being and continuation

of the organism itself. For this reason, Bateson often remarked that “the creature that wins against its environment destroys itself” (p. 493).

We are suggesting that the knowing that recognizes this reciprocal relationship—somatically, emotionally, cognitively—between one’s organismic existence and environment, including the being of other living organisms, is an *aesthetic*. It is a recognition of the pattern which connects, in both evolutionary terms and in the context of the individual organism’s life, that turns one in *aesthetic* appreciation and empathy for other life and for living (Bateson, 1979, p. 8). One is able to regard another being, no matter how apparently remote or alien, as that which somehow shares a fundamental or underlying relation. One’s encounter with that which appears other is grounded in the questions, “*How are you related to this creature? What pattern connects you to it?*” (p. 9)?

To be sure, aesthetic responsiveness is not to be understood as unconditional acceptance, but rather as the disposition to encounter otherness, in both oneself and in others, as an invitation for connection and meaning-making. In that sense it is neutrally disposed, and open to emergent, potential meaning. That said, aesthetic responsiveness is not without its limits, as there may be times when one is unable, for myriad possible and ecologically relevant reasons, to extend an invitation of mutual reciprocity with others.

### What Might Happen when Otherness is Invited?

What might happen if a community, such as the Peter Green Hall Children’s Centre, asks of itself the tacit questions, “Can the illness of one of our members be shared with young children? What otherness does it invite if it is shared? We have been suggesting that the protagonists who make up the community of the Peter Green Hall Children’s Centre were poised to respond aesthetically during a time of unbearable trauma precisely because their practices toward emergent

curriculum disposed them toward looking for patterns that connect – practices they had worked to cultivate and sustain collaboratively over the years.

This aesthetic responsiveness invites at least four related sensibilities. It invites openness and an ability to see one’s own position as precarious, and analogously, one’s knowledge as always already partial. Second, it invites opportunities to enact emergent curriculum where possible. As Bobbi articulated, “Why would I treat this topic any different from anything else?” Third, it invites a sensibility that asked of Bobbi, of the children and their families, and of the staff, “What pattern connects you to each other?”—a question which invites inquiry. And fourth, it invites a sensibility that recognizes children (and adults) as curious, intelligent and relational beings capable of responding to experience in authentic, attentive, appreciative and empathic ways.

We wish to share four examples of responsiveness to the context of the disease and of children’s understanding – one relating to surgery, one to Bobbi’s decision to not use the term “cancer”, and two following Bobbi’s chemotherapy treatment.

When Bobbi explained the surgery she was to have, the children’s understanding was expressed in comments like the following:

Your breast will be flat.

You’ll only have one breast, right?

Can you grow a new breast?

No, says one boy, you’ll have to buy one.

You’ll have a mommy breast and a daddy breast. (Wien et al., 2012, p. 14)

Following the surgery, the children were curious to see the flat breast and Bobbi was prepared for their concern. They wanted to see the scar. She lifted the side of her tank top to show them, and the children were relieved, relating the scar to cuts on their knees and legs. We as authors see this relational moment as one where the scar (both the children’s

scrapes and Bobbi's own scar) becomes an artifact of aesthetic relationality in a reverberating empathy. Like memorials that trace back the experience of trauma, the scar itself becomes a way to document and enact a moment of intense relationship. This intense relationship does not collapse the empathetic recognition of the other into an identification that is reduced to Sameness, but rather keeps the tension attuned, like music, to continually "sense" and hence, respond. This was the moment when the children's empathy was fully activated, for they too knew what it meant to have a cut, a scab, a scar. How do we know this was the case? The staff documented the children's responses with images and text, and it is the interpretation of numerous readers.

A second example is Bobbi's decision to use the term "diseased tissue", and not to evoke the term "cancer" to refer to what she was experiencing. Cancer is a value-laden term, and is already a *thing* – full of meaning – and perhaps unable to invite the partiality and provisional nature of meaning-making necessary for emergent curriculum. Perhaps the more open term "diseased tissue" may evoke—even provoke—an open aesthetic response that invited the children, families, and staff to relate to the new Bobbi – an instantiation now of an Other – both unfamiliar and strange to the children.

A third example concerns the more complex reactions around Bobbi's loss of hair due to chemotherapy treatment. Her co-teachers took a photo of her and showed the children to prepare them for the change in Bobbi's looks from someone with long hair in a ponytail to someone with no hair. "She looks like a monkey," was the response. There was gender confusion as well, as someone asked, "Is she still a girl, or is she a boy?" The children see an altered Bobbi and wonder what this means. They are confused, unsure.

Bobbi chose not to wear a wig so that when she returned to work she was very bald. The children were visibly upset. One child drew Bobbi with black dots of stubble over her head and said, "There's black things

on your head. It scares me.” Someone else said, “You don’t look like you.” The new Bobbi was scary for everyone, so ill, so insistent that she be allowed to keep on working. This sense of the strange is followed with an aesthetic responsiveness to the underlying patterns that connect – a recognition and empathy to Bobbi as kin:

“You had the chemo that made your hair fall out.”

“You’re still Bobbi, though, right? ((Wien et al., 2012, p. 15)

The children spontaneously began to try to make hair for her, using large pleated coffee filters as caps and taping strips of paper to the edges. They wore these themselves as they constructed them, checking out the way the strips of paper fell from their heads. We might infer that this creative artifact arises out of the children’s need to restore Bobbi to what she was, to keep the relation they had with her. It is a small disaster, the conflict between their image of Bobbi as she was and their new relation with her, this altered Bobbi who looks so different.

We argue that the children’s need to restore Bobbi to their previous relation with her, to help repair their sense of loss in a way similar to what memorials do for public disasters. Memorials result from a need to restore a relationship, to mark a connectedness between present and past. It is intriguing that this impulse to restore, through an aesthetic artifact, is shown even by very young children as a route by which to participate in healing.

Bobbi refused to wear the paper caps with strips to represent hair. “I look like death warmed over already. I’m not wearing that” (Wien et al., 2012, p. 17). Here was the moment when the children’s need to restore Bobbi to the way they previously knew her met Bobbi’s need to be accepted as she was in her illness – to be authentic and visible, not to hide. Our hypothesis is that if she felt she could not be authentic i.e., ill and looking ill, she could not be responsive to either her illness or to the children. We think her dilemma at this moment illustrates the fact that the cancer patient in bearing the illness cannot also be expected to take

on other people's distress. This may have been a moment that shows the tenuous nature of aesthetic responsiveness – a moment when Bobbi's need to be seen relationally, not as other, nor as she was before, may have trumped her openness to be restored to how she was previously by the children. The children's demand to restore Bobbi to how she was by making her coffee filter and paper strip hair met with her refusal: A broken pattern of relationality perhaps, or a new pattern in the making? Is there a point beyond which one cannot bear to be aesthetically responsive, a point beyond which one is unable – temporarily or otherwise – to see the patterns that connect apparently very different creatures?

There was discomfort about Bobbi's lost hair for a few days, until one day she tried out a headscarf as a solution. "This sparked a desire among the children to have headscarves" and the teachers tore up fabric to make them for the children (Wien et al., 2012, p. 16). It is at this point that we see the disruption in the children's relationship with Bobbi transform to empathy, as they join Bobbi in wearing a headscarf and so show their capacity to feel with her. We imagine in the presence of deep crisis and suffering and pain, a refusal to respond aesthetically may be necessary for the ecological well-being of the organism-plus-environment. Enabled and grounded in emergent curriculum, however, these moments are punctuated with other moments, as we see in the narrative of *Peter Green Hall Children's Centre*. Poised to respond aesthetically, the *Centre's* sensitive invitation of the disease helped the community grow in empathy and care for one another, and heal together. In Bobbi's own words, "Those children are kinder, gentler, they have so much more empathy; it was empowering for them" (Wien et al, 2012, 18).

Returning to the question asked earlier about how appreciation and empathy are configured in times of trauma, Bobbi's attitude was one of authenticity, remaining true to who she was as a person carrying serious illness. Her attitude was one of attentiveness to the illness – not

withholding it – and also appreciation; for she embraced her own experience, difficult as it was. The argument that these three qualities are present seems reasonable. But what about empathy? In what sense might we say that empathy is a quality of the affect around the experiences?

One interpretation is that the empathy arises first in the children as they respond to Bobbi's situation. In their drawings of her with one breast, always smiling, in their comments about what is happening and attempts to understand, and especially in their empathy in wanting to give her back her hair, perhaps the children's response also shows aesthetic responsiveness. Children of this age do not know how to be anything but authentic. They have been invited through Bobbi's openness to her illness, her willingness to share it in her daily life, to be attentive to it, and she has given the situation the value of visibility, a way of appreciating and embracing it. For the children, the creation of paper hair was a solution that did not work. However, when Bobbi wore the headscarf, their empathy was aroused so much that they joined in wearing a headscarf alongside her so she was not so alone in her illness. It can also be understood as a moment of Bobbi's empathy for the children – to represent a self they could *re-cognize* through a process of reconnaissance. And because making hair out of a coffee filter is definitely a creative act, there is an artifact.

To use the term "aesthetic" suggests not only that there is consideration of affect, but implies in addition a search for beauty. In what way could creating an emergent curriculum from an educator's experience of breast cancer possibly be considered aesthetic, if a search for beauty is a criterion? The problem comes when beauty is associated merely with the visual. In this case the beauty arises from the dialogue of empathic relations moving among the participants and engaged fully by the children. In the centre staff's view, the strongest consequence of this curriculum is the astonishing empathy of the children of that year, who continue to visit the centre four years later (Wien et al., 2012, p.18). There



is an additional way the responsiveness to events can be considered aesthetic; this is in the sense of seeking a creative act that emerges from the logic of the problem, such as the children's creation as a group of paper hair caps for Bobbi.

### Aesthetically Responsive Pedagogy in Early Childhood Studies

We conclude with remarks about an aesthetic sensibility that might be evoked in teacher education in the field of Early Childhood Studies. What if, as Bateson asked, relationality rather than development could be a basis of pedagogy? What if one is taught that understanding has to do with participation in relationships rather than in the discovery of *things*? In a fundamental sense, these questions lie at the core of the work of the Reggio educators, and of Peter Green Hall Children's Centre. Bateson was deeply convinced that an understanding of dynamic relations was not only important to our understanding of our own humanity, but more crucially, it was relevant to the "survival of the whole biosphere" (Bateson, 1979, p. 8). Profoundly concerned about the planet's ecological health and wellbeing, he believed that the roots of our present ecological crisis lie in a sensibility toward control over others, through knowledge and otherwise (Bateson, 1972, p. 492), that sets up humans and the natural environment as "enemies" (p. 490) rather than creating a "sense of aesthetic unity" (Bateson, 1979, p. 19).

On education, Bateson thought that schools ought to focus on engaging children in an inquiry of patterns that connect authentic real-life experiences. In his words:

Why do schools teach almost nothing of the pattern which connects? Is it that teachers know that they carry the kiss of death which will turn to tastelessness whatever they touch and therefore they are wisely unwilling to touch or teach anything of real-life importance? Or is it that they

carry the kiss of death *because* they dare not teach anything of real-life importance? (Bateson, 1979, p. 8)

Bateson (1979) also understood that “without context, words and actions have no meaning at all. This is true not only of all communication in words but also of all communication whatsoever, of all mental process, of all mind” (p. 15). In other words, a difference is a difference only when it is in context, just as a similarity is a similarity only in context. The importance of contextual relevance and the patterns that connect reflects the aim to provide opportunities for curriculum to emerge from the lived experiences of those who embody it. Schooling, seen “as an integral living organism” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 62) is “a system of relations and communications embedded in the wider social system” (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 114). On this point, Wien and Dudley-Marling (2001) note:

Using systems theory as a foundation, no person or object is seen in isolation, nor is any learning a discrete bit, but each is seen always in relation to other possibilities or parts of the community. Nothing is done in isolation: the search is always for complex contexts, more elaborate relations. (p. 110)

We wondered at the beginning of this paper about dispositions that might cultivate in teacher education generative spaces for aesthetic responsiveness. To consider what a pedagogy that honours aesthetic responsiveness might mean for teacher education in the field of early childhood studies, we would like to conclude with these three remarks. The first is about *context*. If a key point of education is to encourage the making of meaning, the development of communication, and the continuation of social, emotional, psychic and physical growth, then it seems to make sense that the items of learning are taught in a contextual, relational way. And we note that a most interesting definition of context arises from the Reggio Emilia experience: “context is an interaction

capable of restructuring knowledge” (Reggio Children, 2009). A second notion is about *emergence*. With an emergent approach to curriculum, the importance of contextual relevance is reflected in a community’s commitment to invite curriculum to emerge *without censorship* from the lived experiences of those who engage with it and with one another. Veà Vecchi, former Reggio Emilia atelierista writes, “The aesthetic experience is that freedom of thought” (as cited in Cooper, 2009, p. 7). The third, and most important notion, we think, is a view of children that recognizes them as strong, capable citizens engaging fully in co-constructing their experiences and making sense of real-life contexts. Such a view may do much to transform the role of educators from transmitters of information to working and living alongside children to make sense of experience conjointly and to inquire about patterns that connect us sustainably in a “more-than-human” (Abram, 1996) world.

This pedagogical disposition is neither easy nor without challenges, but as this paper suggests, this disposition empowers children and adults to build capacity and depth in their aesthetic responsiveness to others, a capacity that is essential if we are to live sustainably together. Can there be any authentic, attentive appreciative, empathic response that is not also one of attachment, of care, of love? The disposition or attitude of aesthetic responsiveness is open to context, even when it provides unbearable news. The tonal quality of such an attitude is the grave and quiet tenderness of love, for as Simone Weil said, “Love is not a state of the soul, it is a direction.” It is a glimpse of the possible relations that might be created and sustained and struggled over in our living together.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a joint exploration of *aesthetic responsiveness*, a capacity for coping creatively in the midst of trauma and suffering. We

began by referring to this disposition as aesthetic seeing, but have since felt that the confining of this sensibility to the sense of sight limits the scope of this relationality. We considered other terms such as attentiveness and listening, but have also felt these terms to be already laden with history. We are thus tentatively using the term aesthetic responsiveness to refer to this disposition.

<sup>2</sup> Other phenomenologically-oriented curricular approaches also invite relational thoughtfulness and interaction (e.g., Maurice Merleau-Ponti, Ted Aoki).

<sup>3</sup> Permission to use the narrative that frames this paper has been provided. For a fuller description of the narrative, see Wien, Keating, West and Bigelow (2012).

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