

Episode 8 Current Perspectives on Early Childhood Education 30th March 2017

My guest today is David Gilkes, an Early Childhood Teacher from Illawarra Primary School in Hobart. David has been a passionate and highly regarded Early Childhood educator for twenty-three Years, with a Master of Early Childhood Education through Griffith University. He has worked mainly with four and five Year old children and their families, in both government and independent settings in the ACT and Tasmania and has been awarded a National Excellence in Teaching Award for Innovation in Early Childhood education.

David has been inspired by the Reggio Emilia Educational Project for many Years and has been fortunate enough to have participated in Study Tours to this Italian city on three occasions. He is currently convener of the Tasmanian Reggio Emilia Network and has presented, consulted and written widely and frequently in issues of education.

Tracy: Well I am here in the beautiful city of Hobart and I am joined by David Gilkes. David thank you for joining me.

David: My pleasure.

Tracy: David why have you decided to focus your career on Early Childhood Education? What interests you about this stage of a person's development?

David: Well, it is really interesting because when I first started doing my teaching degree I was actually doing my primary degree and in my very first Year of Teachers college I got put into a Year 2 classroom because the Teacher that was with me on a prac placement (a student Teacher) had preference for their Year group. I thought that I was going into Year 6 as I always wanted to be a Year 6 Teacher. The student that I was on prac with, got their first choice and got to go in the Year 6 classroom. They put me into a Year 2 classroom and my first reaction was 'babies', I don't want to work with 'babies'. Year 2 are 'babies'. It was a life changer for me. It turned my life around because it was something that I discovered I had a real passion for, it was my 'calling'. You hear people say about having a 'calling'. I really believe that it was for me. I really connected with a lot of the aspects of the job. I connected with the fact that it is an age group where you can really see learning happenings in front of you the whole time. I love the fact that you can walk into a classroom of 4 and 5 Year olds and they are enthusiastic. They have the desire to learn and they have this sense of wonder and they have this sense of creativity. They want to get their hands dirty and they want to get involved in everything and that just makes me really excited every day.

Tracy: It is wonderful really because we don't often hear of men and, without stereotyping men, who are passionate about this area in Early Childhood. So do you find that you bring something to the table?

David: Look I think that and also I can get a little bit frustrated with men and Early Childhood because I would like to think that what I bring is being a good Teacher and regardless of gender I often get parents who say 'I would really like my son or my daughter to have a male Teacher' and look, I understand that this job or profession is dominated by females. That's very true, but I also think that what is it about me that makes me a good Teacher and surely it is more than my gender.

Tracy: In 2014 you were awarded a NEiTA (National Excellence in Teaching) Award for Innovation in Early Childhood and with the grant money you received you participated in a Study Tour of the Forest Kindergartens in Denmark which sounds fascinating. What did you learn on this tour?

David: Look, this was a really exciting experience for me. We are very lucky to live in Hobart and Tasmania, to live in a place that's just naturally beautiful and full of amazing places for children and families to get out and explore. One of the things that I really noticed about being in a place like Denmark is that there is a huge emphasis on trust. There is a huge emphasis on seeing children as competent and capable and the idea that risk is a good thing. There are obviously parameters around risk but exposing children to risk that is safe and lets children explore their limitations and connects them with nature and the outside world. All of these things are really, really positive and in Denmark I was lucky enough to visit a few nature Kindergartens and in some of these settings I saw kids climbing way up high into trees and there was no concern from the adults at all. The children were trusted to take risks and to say 'will this branch support my weight' 'no I don't think it will' or 'yes it will' and these kids were doing amazing things because of that level of trust. And the other thing that was really fantastic about it was, that in Australia we are very risk adverse. We seem to be creating place spaces that are so devoid of risk that we actually causing more accidents. There is actually quite a bit of research that says that there are more accidents happening because playgrounds are becoming safer and safer places and removing that element of risk. In Denmark one of the things that we actually say is if they are climbing over a rock or up a tree and the child falls down and hurts themselves they call that a 'wood wound' and that it's just part of being in the woods. Now if, by example, in that Early Childhood setting, one of the educators or families have carved one of these bits of wood into a car or an aeroplane. Or if they had changed nature in some way and the child had fallen off and hurt themselves then there is every opportunity for the parent to sue if they wanted to. But there is no risk associated with a child falling out of a tree. There is this attitude that that's nature, accidents happen with that, that's part of learning, that's part of making us who we are. So that's a very different attitude.

Tracy: It sounds like it's the attitude of parents that are quite different to Australian parents?

David: Yes absolutely. Look, when we were there we actually saw a young boy have an injury from a tree and the parent was contacted and the parent arrived to collect that child. The attitude of that parent was very much 'dust yourself off and dust yourself down, you will be ok and that this sort of thing happens, let's go home and deal with it' rather than seeing any sort of negativity towards that learning experience. It was a learning experience for that child and the parent appreciated it was a learning experience for that child.

Tracy: Why do you think that it is beneficial to allow, in a sense, a risk in Early Childhood?

David: I really think that what's happening now; we do have this idea of helicopter parenting. This idea of parents wanting to wrap their children up in cotton wool or bubble wrap them to make sure that they are really, really safe. Of course we understand that there are lots of things that can happen to all of us but unless children are exposed to risks and risk taking, then they are never going to get the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and to test boundaries, and to have that self-confidence, and to just generally have that ability to be able to solve problems by themselves and with each other.

Tracy: Although I do suppose schools do have to protect themselves don't they?

David: Oh absolutely. We have things put in place to ensure that everybody is safe but one of the things that I have actually started doing a lot more with my children, is actually, we have to fill out risk assessments for certain activities that we do and we have actually started to do those together with the children, so are actually having a voice in those risk assessments and what we are finding surprisingly, depending on what your image of the child is, that the children actually know what the risks are and that they know what the problems might be and they are actually putting forward

sensible suggestions to keep themselves safe. So I think that there is a way of managing what we have to do but also making it a bit more realistic in exposing kids to risks in a more positive way.

Tracy: You also went to Italy where you've been inspired by the Reggio Emilia Educational Project for many years, and you are currently convener of the Tasmanian Reggio Emilia Network. For those of us who haven't heard of this project – can you tell us about the mission and principles of Reggio Emilia education?

David: One of the important things to know about Reggio Emilia is that it's not a recipe, it's not a model, it's not something that we can replicate here in Australia. Reggio Emilia is a city in Northern Italy, it's very close to Bologna. After the Second World War, the families in Reggio Emilia were looking to rebuild a lot of their cities and looking for a way they could provide for their children in a more positive way, having come out from such a negative experience. One of the things they were left with after the war was an old army tank, and the people in the village decided they would sell this army tank. The men in the village were interested in building a new theatre with the money they raised but the women in the town were interested in building preschools because they saw that as a way of moving forward from the war and influencing their children in a really positive way. So they needed the help of a philosopher, an educator, and they found that, in Loris Malaguzzi. Loris Malaguzzi is the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach and in the years that followed, there have been infant/toddler centres 0-3 Years and preschools 3-6 Years that have been established in the city of Reggio Emilia. They have, at their core, the values that education is a right, that children are competent capable creative beings that have their own sense of agency. They believe in the environment as a really important Teacher, they use the phrase 'the environment' as a third Teacher. They believe in children having a hundred languages, ways of expressing themselves and their theories. Really, at its core is this really strong image of the child that is a protagonist and an active participant in the learning process.

Tracy: So often I think, David, parents and Teachers think they know best and handing control and responsibility over to children, again, requires trust and risk. Why do we have an issue with that as grown-ups?

David: I think that's a really interesting question. One of the things about the Reggio Emilia educational project, and something I really try to live in my practice, is this whole idea of co-construction of learning. That it's not about me being the sage on the stage or being the imparter of knowledge, filling up children's heads with facts and information, and I think that's where we come from. We come from this place that's our own schooling. We were all brought up with a Teacher at the front of the classroom, and us in rows, hearing information and facts that we were supposed to memorise and learn. That's what teaching was. These days, I think there is a lot more understanding around the process of co-construction in learning, that it's not just about us imparting that knowledge but about children and families working together to construct meaning together. I think that is something that is really strong in the Reggio Emilia project, and I think it's something that is really important in the Early Years because there is this image of children as being needy, of being cute, of needing an adult to make them ready for something, to prepare them. There is this whole idea that we need to prepare children to become adults. They are citizens now. They are protagonists and active children with agency right now. If we come from that place, then I think it just shifts our whole idea of what education is all about.

Tracy: Can you give us a specific example of a classroom project that utilises what you are saying there?

David: Yes, for example, just in the last couple of years at the school I am currently at. We took the children to our local shopping centre. We thought the children might start engaging with some of the local shops there, the post office, the pizza shop, some of those things. We had a very set idea in our head of what the children might engage with, and want to learn about. What was really interesting when we went to that shopping centre is the children were fascinated with a shop that was empty. What we found from deeper exploration and actually listening to the children, and that's something that's key in the Reggio Emilia educational project, is this pedagogy of listening rather than telling. If we really listen to the children and what they had to say about this empty shop, they were starting to empathise with this empty shop and starting to attribute human characteristics to it. The shops feeling sad, it's got nobody to play with, it's got nothing inside of it. And our project, our enquiry project, came about from the idea of the empty shop. From this a lot of learning came about so that we actually ended up making presents for the empty shop, to cheer up the empty shop. Our whole project developed around this idea of empathy, and what it means to make somebody or something in this case, feel better. And so that only came through co-constructing the learning with the children and really listening to the children, and that's what really became a really deep and meaningful enquiry and meaningful learning.

Tracy: It sounds like it's also about asking the right questions?

David: Absolutely, and I really love when, I think it's the Dalai Lama, who said that there is a reason why we have two ears and one mouth. It's really important that we do a lot more listening to children, rather than speaking, because if we really believe that learning is co-construction than you've got to leave that time for listening.

Tracy: Research seems critical in order to fully understand and value children's processes of action and thought. David, what is the latest research into Early Childhood education telling us?

David: I think a lot of what I have already talked about is coming out very strongly in the research, that children are not empty vessels that they're not just waiting for us to fill them up with ideas. They're very much children that have really strong ideas, theories and can really construct learning. I think one of the things that I'm really finding is that theory needs to work alongside practice. One of the things, going back to Loris Malaguzzi again, he compared it to a bicycle - that a bicycle has two wheels and that, one bicycle wheel is theory, and that one of those wheels is practice, and they really need to work together. I think to be a practitioner of excellence, I think you really need to understand the theory and you need to understand how that relates to the practice. There are a lot of great things happening at the moment in Schools all around our country and I think a lot of that is coming from this idea of socio-constructivism and this idea of co-constructing knowledge together with children.

Tracy: Speaking for research, in your Master's thesis you focused on parent prospective on beauty in Australian Early Childhood settings and its place of importance in the life of a child. Can you tell us about your thesis and finds in a nutshell?

David: Something of a thesis in a nutshell, always fun! One of the things that I've been really passionate about as an educator in my own work is providing experiences that are, I guess, rich in beauty and aesthetics, I think that's a really important part of teaching. Veyavecy* who is actually an educator from Reggio Emilia says that the task of teaching cannot forget beauty, and that really promoted me to think, well, what do they actually mean by this, what does she mean, the task of teaching cannot forget beauty? In Reggio Emilia, beauty and aesthetics permeates everything they do. It's one of their core values, and they're not just talking about beauty on a superficial level. They're talking about beauty as a way of making learning connections. They're talking about beauty

in the relationships. They're talking about beauty in the environment and the materials and the context of learning that we provide for children. One of the things that have been really interesting in this research is getting to understand some parent prospective on beauty, because we all know that if we walk into a space, we are going to get an instant reaction to that space. You compare walking into a room that is very bare, very empty, compared to a space that is actually set up in a way that is purposefully thinking about beauty and aesthetics and the different reaction you get to that. It's really interesting because I feel that as educators we set up classroom environments every day and we need to be really conscious of what sort of messages we are communicating to our kids and also to our families. That's just one part of it, as I say it's more multilayered than that, it's about beauty in relationships, it's about beauty in making learning connections. Gregory Batson, who is well known in educational circles, talks about aesthetics as a pattern which connects. I really think that one of the things my research has been highlighting is that beauty and aesthetics are a way of children and adults making connections with their learning.

Tracy: Do beauty and aesthetics enhance learning?

David: I think so, we all know when something is missing in regards to beauty and aesthetics. What is really interesting, talking to the parents, is that it was not something that they necessarily considered but when they started reflecting upon it through some of the questions I asked in interviews with the parents, they found that it was something that was really important. What I actually asked some of the participants to do, was to actually take photographs of things in their Early Childhood setting that actually captured or represented beauty for them. It was really interesting to see the different parent's prospective on that, some of the parents captured some different documentation of their children's work on the wall, and for them that was beautiful. Some parents captured the way an educator had set up, maybe some glass bottles with some colourful liquids that were making beautiful light and reflections in the classroom window, as something representing beauty. Another parent took a photo out in the garden because, well, we can't talk about beauty and not talk about beauty in nature. So there are so many different levels and aspects of beauty, and what was really interesting in these interviews was finding out that a lot of parents hadn't considered these things but if it was missing it would be really noticeable.

Tracy: David, in your article "Parent's prospective on beauty, reflecting on research" you said there is strong belief that exposure to, and experiences with beauty, are both a fundamental need and a child's right and that there are many associated benefits. What are these benefits?

David: They're certainly not limited to these things, but some of the benefits include; improvement in physical and mental health; building connections in learning and understanding in relationships; a greater awareness of our place in nature; and also sustainability in care for the planet. Richard Louv, who talks about children suffering from nature deficit disorder, actually says that unless we actually connect with our planet and have that time with it, that we are not going to necessarily be inclined to save it. And so, one of the things that I think is really important, we obviously connect to things that are beautiful, and so a greater awareness of our place in nature means that we're more likely to care for it. I think that experiences with beauty give us the benefits of nurturing wonder, discovery, creative expression and I just think there is this greater appreciation of beautiful things, whether that's art, whether that's nature, whether that's relationships.

Tracy: How do you setup your classroom to reflect your view and beliefs?

David: I spend a lot of time thinking about the environment because if I think of the ideas of Reggio Emilia and the idea of environment being a third Teacher, as the environment speaking to children and families, of what it is that I value, what it is that I feel is important in children's learning. Then I

really think I need to spend that time setting up the environment to reflect my values, to reflect my purposes, to reflect what sort of messages I want to give. So, for example, one of the things that happen in our classroom space is that we have very muted, neutral and natural colours within the environment. So that our environments are not loud, they're not brightly coloured, what is actually standing out is the children's work, the documentation of the children's learning. That is actually what makes our space a beautiful, engaging and meaningful space. It's not the vibrant alphabet coloured charts on the wall, it's not the purple table with the yellow chairs. They're not the things that are beautiful, it's the things that are put in there with thought and consideration and it's also very much the relationships, it's the beauty in the relationships. I spend a lot of time making sure that the relationships I have with the children and their families reflect this idea of beauty.

Tracy: How do you do that?

David: Well, I think that takes time, as an educator you have to really invest in this. It's something that has to come from a place that is I guess within you, a place of heart. I don't think you can be an Early Childhood Teacher without coming from a place of heart and building those relationships with people. And so I spend a lot of time nurturing those relationships with my children and with my families, whether that's through humour, whether that's through listening, whether that's through really making sure the children's ideas are valued and respected, whether it's making that extra bit of time at the beginning of the end of the day to talk to parents. Whether that's making parents feel like they are welcome to come in any time and be part of the learning programs. I think all of these things help to nurture those relationships.

Tracy: In terms of relationships David, all parents want to develop a positive relationship with their children. Through your research, what are some of the key points parents should be aware of as they raise children in today's world?

David: I think coming back to what I was talking about earlier, it's very much about having this idea in your head that your child is a competent and capable human being and a citizen now and really believing that. I think that one of the things I really try to live in my work with children in the classroom, is really having this openness to what children can bring each day to their learning, to the groups learning and to my learning and to the learning of the community. I think if you come into your relationship with a child that they are competent, that they are creative, that they are really deep thinkers, then the skies the limit with possibilities for them. I think if we have this narrow focus of children being just something that we need to prepare for adulthood and prepare to be citizens in the community, then I think we are really missing out on this wonderful opportunity to nurture children for who they are, to respect their voice, their identity and their ability to make a difference.

Tracy: You talk about setting, and environments, and connections with nature. Why is this important for children, this connection with nature and how can parents enhance that connection at home?

David: I think one of the things that we are all guilty of is being very time poor and one of the things that I would really encourage families to do, is to actually spend that time doing the things that we have very fond memories of ourselves as children, playing down at the creek, climbing a tree, drawing in the mud, finding tadpoles, all of those things that we have as really fond memories from our childhood. If we are really concentrating on, let's see how many after school activities we can do, let's see if I can keep my child as safe as possible by wrapping them up in cotton wool, then we are really depriving them of having that opportunity to have a childhood and a childhood is where we start really making sense of the world, where we really start making connections. So I would really just encourage families to get out there, get out into the dirt, and get out into the rain. I love

how in Denmark they say there is no such thing as bad weather just bad clothing. Just get out there and enjoy it because there are so many opportunities with just being connected with nature that we miss out on if we are stuck in a world of being wrapped up in cotton wool, sitting in front of a computer, taking off to all these after school care activities that don't involve connection with nature. I think there is a real danger in going towards what Richard Louv describes as nature deficit disorder, I think it's a real danger. We have got to stay connected.

Tracy: Do you think parents should supervise this nature play? I mean there is always that fear there of something happening to your children.

David: Look we live in Australia, we live in a land of snake and spiders and all sorts of threats. But the reality is, we still need to have that element of trust, we still need to manage risk. Sure, you know if you watch your kids, for example, in the playground space of the place I currently work at, we allow our children to climb trees, but we have certain trees that the children know are better for climbing than others because they will be safer trees for climbing. So it's about establishing those boundaries and routines and ideas around that tree to make it a safe place. So it's not about saying climb all trees, you still have to have some things in place to make sure you're managing risk but it's certainly not the opposite extreme. Don't climb that tree, that tree is unsafe so it's all about balance I think.

Tracy: I think a lot of the concern too, is that if you let your children walk up the street on their own or go down to the creek on their own, you see the terrible reports on the news about children being taken etc. I really think this feeds into a lot of this fear, would you agree?

David: Absolutely, absolutely.

Tracy: And it's probably justified in some respects as well.

David: In some ways it is but I think also there are ways of managing that, there are ways of putting in boundaries and safe practices. You know there are certainly things we can do to help keep our children safe, their knowing their phone number, all of these sorts of these. There are all these little things you can do to ensure that you are managing these risks in a way that is still giving them that exposure to it but is still keeping them safe as well.

Tracy: Because essentially what you are saying is if we don't allow this, there are negative impacts on our children's development.

David: Absolutely, there is certainly a lot of research to show that this is the case. That if we're not giving children the exposure to nature, that if we are not giving children exposure to taking risk, then we're really having detrimental effects on their overall health, physical and mental. One of the things that were really interesting about going to Denmark was going down one of the streets, and we were outside of a cafeteria, and outside the cafeteria there were all the prams lined up with all the babies. Because in Denmark there is this belief that you need to be outside, you need to be out in the fresh air and weather because it's good for your child's health. And inside the restaurant there were the dogs of the owners, the dogs were actually inside having a meal with the owner and the babies were outside. Now in Australia we have a completely different perspective on that, the dogs are outside and the babies are inside because we want to keep them safe, but that comes from the society really, valuing this and really valuing that sense of trust. We are certainly not at that stage but it's certainly something that we need to think about. How can we start making little inroads to make sure that our children are getting these benefits of connecting with nature.

Tracy: If we finish today David, I'm looking towards the future, where is your research taking you? Where do you plan to go and what are your hopes for the future?

David: Look for me, I really feel like one of the things that the research highlighted was the fact that we need to be really conscious of our image of children and what we believe children to be. I think we are well and truly past this idea of children being needy, we're really past this idea of preparing children to become something that education is about preparing for the work force. We are past this idea. These are ideas that came about during the industrialisation period, where the whole idea of education was to produce people for the work force. That's not what education is about, education is about building really beautiful people here and now, citizens that can contribute to the present and to the future. The way of doing that is by having these wonderful relationships, by having a really strong image of child, by making sure that we are really focusing on this idea that they are competent, capable, and creative, they're children with rights, they have the potential to make a difference here and now and then I think that the sky's the limit.

Tracy: Well David, any child that goes through your classroom is a very lucky child. Thank you so much for joining me today.

David: Thanks very much.

And I hope you enjoyed my interview with David Gilkes from Illawarra Primary School in Hobart. If you're interested in learning more about David's work visit his website: <http://dgilkeseducationconsultant.com.au/>

If you are interested in the Reggio Emilia educational project, go to <https://www.reggioaustralia.org.au>

#Interview by Senior Teacher, Tracy Burton, BA Arts (Communication – Theatre/Media), Grad Dip Ed