



Dispatch

Developing a Pedagogy of Listening: Experiences in an Indigenous Preschool

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Preface: In the Footsteps of Jackie Kirk

I was honoured to receive The Jackie Kirk Fieldwork Fellowship Award in 2010 in the course of my doctoral research. Kirk's scholarship has impacted and motivated me in my research and teaching. I am inspired by her activism and commitment to the improvement of education for communities in conflict (Kirk, 2007). Her creative practices in participatory visual research methodologies (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008) encouraged me to take on challenges when facing the unknown. I have attended mindfully to her charge, to engage in the process of reflexivity (Kirk, 2004) in my research and in my teaching.

Jackie exuded commitment to quality and meaningful education, probing into conundrums of the marginalized (Kirk & Winthrop, 2007) and bestowing messages that spoke to the world. I have prepared this dispatch to illustrate how Kirk's legacy has resounded and will continue to resonate into the future. My story, therefore, shadows the footsteps of an honourable and notable scholar, taken much too soon.

Introduction

In the field of early childhood education, there has been consistent scholarly interest in the matter of *listening* to young children (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Lansdown, 2005; Rinaldi, 2006). Dewey (1916) suggested that listening embraces the art of communication, generating people's participation with goals of making meaning and breaking down social barriers. The notion of a *pedagogy of listening* first emerged from the world-renowned Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993).

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It focuses on careful listening to children and their theories to provide insight into how young children think and how they make connections that are meaningful to them. In this arena, the pedagogy of listening relates to teaching and learning in that it involves the child's and adult's pursuit of meaning and understanding through project-based approaches combined with careful listening to one another (Rinaldi, 2001). Reggio Emilia's belief in a pedagogy of listening gives rise to a learning methodology; it is an evolving process whereby teachers further develop theories about children and their ideas through collegial dialogue, sharing and listening.

From the years 2010-2014, I led a research project in partnership with a First Nations early childhood center (the Step by Step Child and Family Center) in Kahnawake, Mohawk Territory. The study detailed an Indigenous community's quest to find innovative ways of reflecting culture in their programs by placing culture at the forefront of teaching and learning. In our work, we were guided by the following key questions: What components might support a paradigm shift to promote quality early education within a culturally relevant context? How could the arts expand children's cultural experiences, and how might First Nations culture be woven seamlessly into daily practice? In the course of our study, a devotion to listening emerged organically. Upon reflection, it has become clear that the pedagogy of listening happened because the core value of genuine partnership was continually central to all discussions. We were committed to listening to each other and learning from one another. While the research aimed to shed light on the way culture and learning might be conceptualized in early education, it was listening that arose as significant. The plethora of documentation I collected over the phases of research illustrated and underscored how interactions amongst participants prompted the pedagogy of listening. Remarkably, a pedagogy of listening happened on many levels: within culture (e.g., educators listening to each other, teachers and children listening to each other, children listening to children), between cultures (e.g., myself and the community at Step by Step), and intrapersonal considerations (e.g., listening to myself).

A Methodology called "Listening"

Research corroborates that culture can profoundly influence children's approach to learning (Ball, 2005; Battiste, 2000; Brooker, 2002; Espinoza, 2010; Kirk, 2007; Li, 2001; Méjía-Arauz, Rogoff, & Paradise, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). Some young children come to school accustomed to learning practices from their communities that have guided them since birth. Moreover, Preston, Cotrell, Pelletier and Pearce (2012) have claimed that the structures of early childhood programs in Indigenous communities need to match the values of the community.

For these reasons, I realized that my research would have to attend to a methodology of listening: a way or method of hearing, reflecting on, and attending to multiple perspectives in the research process. These perceptions included Indigenous perspectives, my own, and those of the educators and the children. I attended to Indigenous awareness of meaningful relationships when positioning myself as a researcher involved in the Mohawk cultural context. Building relationships impacted the epistemological approaches brought forward throughout my course of study. My practices toward such considerations were comprised of active listening. I began with self-reflection, contemplating my own strengths and weaknesses when engaged in particular situations that involved listening attention (Kirk, 2004). Such thinking had to be reiterated during pivotal moments of the research when directions were altered. My listening also included being thoughtful about what was being shared, and I worked hard at deferring judgement and reflecting in my journal. Throughout the research, my skills developed in gaining information and perspectives that are critical to attending to trustworthiness and building relationships with the community.

Importantly, as an “outsider” within a research situation in an Indigenous context, the pedagogy of listening took on a new and important meaning. Smith (1999) emphasizes that outside researchers need to re-position methodologies in order to know, comprehend, and research from Indigenous perspectives and for Indigenous purposes. Culturally sensitive approaches needed to go beyond Western research practices; relationships, conversation and listening have to take on significant roles. Smith (1999) underscores how effective communication gathers the skills of talking and listening in order for a researcher to receive privileged knowledge and to develop significant relationships. I took Smith’s message to heart throughout my journey, and along the way I too developed the Indigenous value of listening.

Significantly, my reflections respected Kirk’s (2007) in-depth contemplation on appropriate education when dealing with places in “fragile states.” Kirk revealed how, in renewal situations, education often does not meet the needs of the community and is instead designed and carried out without significant consideration of the people involved. While her gaze planned for organizations and agencies to act, I extracted from her understanding to help position myself and situate my work within the community of Kahnawake. I had to be mindful in my contemplation of the people of Kahnawake and of their efforts to maintain cultural identity.

Kirk (2007, p. 180) defined fragility as occurring in “failing, failed and recovering states.” Her definition helped me frame my experiences in a similar way; I likened my research partners, a progressive Mohawk community, to a recovering state. They were trying to release themselves from ineffective practices that had been historically imposed on them through settler culture and praxis. This community focused on advocating for learning that would sustain their own ways of knowing and cultural values (Canadian

Council on Learning, 2007). Therefore, nothing in our approach deviated from a focus on cultural relevance, adhering to Kirk's (2007) cautionary stance that "renewed education" does not always provide what is best for the community. I had to work hard at my research within an Indigenous paradigm that embodied the perspectives and knowledge held in this particular First Nations community. For three and a half years I acted as "participant observer" (Giltrow, 1995, p. 46), interacting with 10 teachers, two administrators, and 10 classrooms of children who are First Nations (aged 18 months to five years old; approximately 160 children each year) to create a collaborative research community. I established my role as a qualitative researcher through a meaningful relationship of collaboration and trust with the community at Step by Step Child and Family Center.

In the first stage of research, the focus was on implementing a phased approach to developing teachers' skills in undertaking meaningful projects, as seen in the Reggio Emilia approach. Documentation practice and thoughtful reflections were objectives so that teachers could ponder what they were learning about their young students and how they engaged in a culturally grounded curriculum. This phase served as a starting point to understand where intersections of Reggio and Mohawk principles happened. It was a phase dedicated to learning: a venture that would focus on teachers becoming familiar with a project-based approach to teaching and learning using cultural topics. The arts were used as a vehicle, or as children's language, to interpret and build understandings. Additionally, it was an educational phase for me as I developed a better comprehension of Mohawk culture and tradition. New practices of careful observation, transcribing conversations, recording and selecting photos, along with sharing sessions of each other's documentation, began the educators' listening.

In the second phase of study, my role in the research context changed. I transformed from teacher to mentor and model, actively guiding educators and children in their experiences. During this phase, attention went deeper to focus on an arts-based curriculum grounded in Mohawk culture. Over the summer months, Step by Step initiated the construction of four *ateliers*, providing distinct places and spaces for small groups of children to engage in their experiences. The questions during that phase looked at what role the *atelier* played in developing Mohawk culture. Would the offering of art as a mode in which to express ideas and learning expand the children's cultural experiences? This phase of research emerged as significant because Reggio Emilia philosophies were being better practiced using the methods of project-based learning through the arts. Then, a disturbance in the research occurred that set me back as a researcher, yet upon reflection supported the rising significance of a pedagogy of listening.

To be exact, on March 16, 2012, administrators Nancy and Gail invited me to a meeting over lunch. During that meeting, my two colleagues directed the conversation. They expressed that they, and their teams of teachers, had learned a great deal from the Reggio Emilia approach I had "brought" to

them. However, they wanted to look at the way learning could be expressed as Mohawk culture. With gratitude to how Reggio thinking awakened the process that resonated with Mohawk values, the administrators felt the objectives needed to be re-focused. In particular, they wanted to put an end to associating teaching and learning as a Reggio Emilia approach, and to utilizing the phrase “from Reggio-thinking.” As stated by Gail, “It has to be our thinking; that was the goal from the beginning.” As the conversation continued, I sensed the importance of removing the control from the Reggio Emilia approach, of my theoretical approach, and realized I was being invited to revisit the objectives of the research. I left the meeting that day feeling odd and concerned that my Reggio foundations had come across too powerfully. The excitement I was feeling about the Reggio work being carried out in the *ateliers* may have transcended the intentions of strengthening and localizing cultural meaning and... I had to listen. My journal that day expressed it all:

My drive home that day was just as uncomfortable as my meeting. The Mercier Bridge, again under repair, was down to one lane and a narrow one at that! I had to concentrate well to stay within the boundaries. My car and I shared an analogous experience of attending to the journey, a route that somehow was being detoured and there were no choices. This is a road that had to be taken. What was clear was the fact that being culturally sensitive was a raw and intense experience, and I had to always try to be mindful of that to honour the participants and the road ahead. Feeling out of sorts at that time, I eventually began to acknowledge that this juncture was significant as it added unique pieces to the map of my study. That day, I conquered the narrowing cones alongside the railings of the bridge, keeping me in line as I crossed over to the other side. Would I be able to overcome the diversions when I had to return the next day? (Journal reflection, March 16, 2012)

Step by Step ended the school year by showcasing children’s work at an in-house museum. Teachers titled the exhibition: “TSI NIIONKWARIHÓ:TEN; Our Culture/Our Ways: Inspired by our Kanien’kehá:ka Culture and Teachings.” The title showed an intentional direction of our study from then on. I came to accept that the adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach had transformed into an appreciation of Reggio principles, and that this synergy had rekindled Mohawk values in this community. From that moment on listening would help the community search further for their culture, their ways.

Released from prioritising Reggio Emilia as the guiding philosophy, we returned to the *ateliers* inspired by an arts-integrated approach during Phase Three of study. However, this time it was different. While teaching and learning had advanced, we also cycled back to keep cultural objectives central. Listening allowed me to follow this new direction; Mohawk culture would lead the way.

Understanding a Pedagogy of Listening.

Listening was central to my research design and methodology and unexpectedly emerged as a significant theme in my own learning journey; a pedagogy of listening arose from this research journey and my data. I emphasize that the theme of a pedagogy of listening was an authentic value that emerged, and not a predictable one. My focus on understanding a pedagogy of listening has been driven by the unfolding of the research, the relationships built with my associates in Kahnawake, and my attempts to unearth relevant themes from the data, alongside those themes that illuminated the questions being investigated. Mays and Pope (2000) maintain that depth and breadth of qualitative research lie in examining and identifying essential themes that may offer additional space for augmenting theories. I place understanding a pedagogy of listening in such a category. From this longitudinal study, significant subthemes emerged: how the teachers listened to the children; how teachers listened to each other; and how I learned to listen to myself and others, or reciprocal listening.

Teachers' Listening to Children

Teachers' thoughtful listening to children emerged, well-illustrated by the educators' interactions and documentation of the children's experiences and ideas (see Figure 1). The environmental and psychological changes that came with the establishment of new kinds of learning spaces foreshadowed the careful listening that followed. Phases of the study brought about the transformation of the environment within the classrooms and with the additions of the *ateliers*. The inventory of materials and thoughtfulness to creating a space that "spoke" Mohawk culture were elements that set the stage for meaningful interactive experiences. As educators became more accustomed to working with small groups and focused intently on arts experiences, their skills developed in careful and tender listening, as is reflected in the following:

She told me she needed time to reflect on the conversation.

Monique would only take smaller groups into the *atelier* now. It was challenging for her to listen to more than 3 or 4 children at a time when in an activity.

(Field notes, March 10, 2012)

The administrators also seemed to appreciate the careful listening that occurred between teachers and children, as Gail described:

Also, it's about reflecting, the documentation; a whole other meaning. It's made teachers aware. They said it, especially during our meetings. It made them listen.

They actually saw the children differently. They learned from them. They're all better listeners. (Interview, Gail (administrator), June 23, 2012)



Figure 1. Teachers' documentation highlighted the children's active engagement with the natural world (Photo by Carina Deer).

The concept of teachers' careful listening was further emphasized by the vigilant documentation that the educators produced, gathered, studied and discussed throughout the phases of research. Photo sharing sessions underscored how teachers collaborated and listened carefully to their students when transcribing their thoughts. Teachers described photos that told the stories of children's active learning because of the arts experiences. Nancy (administrator) remarked that teachers "talked less and listened more," thereby appreciating that listening allowed for an improved understanding of how children were making meaning. Significantly, teachers took on the responsibility of listening intently to the voices of children. Their careful attention helped to build a culturally responsive program for their young students.

Teachers Listening to Each Other

The evolution of the *ateliers* coincided with teachers' growing abilities to listen to each other. From this pedagogy of listening, a true learning community emerged. The educators shared knowledge and were open to feedback (see Figure 2). I was able to note recurring indications of professional teamwork that arose from such careful listening:

There is more collaboration as we as a team ventured into this journey together – all the staff. We shared ideas and kept notes to remember.

Videos were taken for sharing and teacher reflection.

(Field notes, Teacher meeting, June 2, 2012)

I see that we can sit together in an academic fashion and have a discussion that deepens knowledge. It helps to move us forward by expanding our minds and our thinking.

(Interview, Melissa (teacher), June 22, 2012)

Pidgeon, Munoz, Kirkness and Archibald (2013, p. 5) call for First Nations communities to re-establish ownership of their education to "...ensure the protection of the next seven generations' rights to good quality education that truly honours Indigenous ways of knowing, being, languages and values and culture." The Step by Step teachers developed their understandings as a result of careful listening and working alongside their students and colleagues.



Figure 2. Educators discussing photo documentation (Photo by Sheryl Smith-Gilman).

Reciprocal listening

Cultural long-term projects showed how the child and teacher interacted in a pedagogy of reciprocal listening. This sub-theme emerged due to the strength revealed in mutual and communal listening amongst all participants (e.g., children, teachers, administrators, community, and researcher). I listened carefully to comments, and in reflection, those remarks supported the importance of a pedagogy of listening. As I place more and more emphasis on the appearance of reciprocal listening, I have become intimately aware of how I too am implicated. It was my intention from the beginning of collaboration that this research would belong to the Mohawk community. My ongoing review of field notes and journal entries helped to show the message of Mohawk ownership and culture, a message that required mindful listening. I had a responsibility to listen and act on what was being communicated. Listening informed me to step aside, move away from my role as “expert” and make way for culture to find its place.

My understanding of a pedagogy of listening revealed the value in listening. It comprises taking hold of one’s personal and professional beliefs, disclosing them, and then being able to take the time to understand that there may be differences in the interpretation of what is valuable and what counts as knowledge, and therefore being responsible for taking action and moving in different directions. My relationship with the community was grounded in respect, understanding, and sharing mutual goals for the education of their young children. I felt a deep and ethical responsibility to move forward in the collaboration, but to do so within the thinking parameters of my partners – appreciating the provocation of the Reggio Emilia approach, but leaving aside some of my own ways of thinking about curriculum (Kirk, 2004). The primary direction had to come from the ways of Mohawk thinking. Listening was difficult but proved to be an indispensable exercise. I recall Patricia Hill Collins’ message to the researcher who takes on the role of “the outsider within” – “Indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity” (Hill Collins, 1991, as cited in Smith, 1999, p. 5).

Battiste (2010, p. 17) explains that the research process is an “untangling of knowledge knots.” For me, this meant untangling myself from preconceived ideas in order to think about what was important to this community. The curriculum had to be theirs because it is critical for First Nations communities to affirm ownership of their vision of education (Oskineegish & Berger, 2013).

I struggled with that message on March 16th as I listened to the administrators reclaiming the research and distinguishing Reggio and Indigenous approaches to education. Eventually, I also had to surrender my role as mentor and coach to the educators and administrators as they had become the researchers and were ready to move forward along their own paths.

I learned to step aside as Mohawk culture took the lead and to take the opportunity to follow and learn to listen. My long process of gathering data and months of analysis has shown my growing understanding of a pedagogy of listening. The participants and I have come together as co-producers of knowledge (Davidson-Hunt & O’Flaherty, 2007) to acquire a new and deeper understanding of each other and the research outcomes. I have learned that listening, if open, shared and reciprocal, can help facilitate and construct the integration of cultural identity and curriculum. A pedagogy of listening gave rise to purposeful dialogue and shared knowledge, as well as novel ideas and collaborative considerations whereby new thinking about cultural identity in the early years of schooling was approached. It was with this contemplation that my study unfolded and – surprisingly to me – illuminated a pedagogy of listening.

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