

A Tribute to Sue Fraser

Pat Tarr and Carol Anne Wien

Pat Tarr is associate professor emerita in the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. She has been inspired by the Reggio philosophy since 1990 when a presentation by Lilian Katz about a project from Reggio caused her to rethink her image of the child and her role as an early childhood art educator. Her research and publications focused on implications of the Reggio philosophy for Canadian contexts, art education, classroom environments, and documentation. Although retired, she continues to be involved in the Calgary Reggio Network Association that supports professional development for educators from preschool through higher education, while focusing on her second career as a fibre artist.

Carol Anne Wien is professor emerita and senior scholar in the Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto. She is widely known for her work on emergent curriculum and pedagogical documentation, inspired by the Reggio Emilia experience, and is author of *The Power of Emergent Curriculum* and several other books, editor of *Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom: Interpreting the Reggio Emilia Approach in Schools*, and co-author, with Karyn Callaghan and Jason Avery, of *Documenting Children's Meaning*. She speaks frequently at conferences and workshops across Canada and in the USA. She loves the arts—traces of the creative spirit—and constantly attempts to build them into daily life.



We were startled and saddened to learn that our dear colleague, friend, and mentor Sue Fraser had died April 30, 2019, in Ireland, having embarked on a much-anticipated trip to Europe. We offer our tribute to her as an expression of gratitude for all the ways the spirit of her living intersected with ours. We trace both our intersections with her professional life and our relationships with her, because they were interwoven, not compartmentalized.

Pat: I met Sue on Galiano Island, British Columbia, in 1970 where she and Hugh had set up camp in a small cabin while they built a house. We drank tea by the ocean overlooking a small cove, with children and dogs (a Labrador retriever and an old English sheepdog) scrambling over the rocks. This was the first of many visits to Galiano, with picnics on the beach, picking blackberries, fishing for rock cod, with children, dogs, family, and friends merging in memory under the warmth of the summer sun.

We connected on a professional level after I began courses in early childhood education at the University of British Columbia and I discovered that Sue had a preschool in the basement of her home in West Vancouver, established not so long after she and Hugh had immigrated from Africa. I spent a day at West Bay Playschool being welcomed into a community of teachers and children that reflected the values I was studying; her values for outdoor play resulted in a natural environment filled with sand, water, mud, chickens, and even an old car. Inside there were opportunities to explore art materials, blocks, and all the traditional materials of a quality early childhood program. We began a friendship based not just on family connections but also on mutual professional interests. Our careers were parallel over many years—teaching courses for early childhood students through adult education programs, later teaching at Douglas College, and our mutual interest in the Reggio Emilia philosophy and its implications for Canadian contexts. Sue and Cathleen Smith were part of the first Canadian study group to visit the preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia in 1993 and were fortunate to work with Loris Malaguzzi during that visit. I was torn because I was committed to a lifelong dream of visiting Japan at the same time; hence I missed the opportunity to spend time with Loris Malaguzzi.

Sue mentored me when I taught early childhood art courses for adult education programs, and later at Douglas College. At that time, we were grounded in a developmental view of young children's art making and a strong desire to support children's creativity through their use of materials. We railed against teacher-directed and precut craft activities and, heaven forbid, colouring books! We were well grounded in Viktor Lowenfeld, Rhoda Kellogg, and other art educators of the 1970s and 80s. After our introduction to the work coming from Reggio Emilia and our visits there, we were challenged to question our previous reliance on developmental stages in art and our more hands-off approach introducing art materials to young children.

Painting, beyond children's art, comes to mind as well, for we shared an interest in watercolour painting and in the watercolour paintings by the German expressionist artist Emil Nolde.

The 1998 NAEYC conference session by Sue, Cathleen Smith, and Elvira Reid

Carol Anne: In 1998, Sue, Cathleen, and Elvira presented their innovative work in the early childhood education program at Douglas College, Vancouver. These three women were pioneers in Canada, the first to consider the challenges to our early years practice that the Reggio Emilia experience offers us and the first in Canada to create something new—an integration of several traditional courses and an opening up of the structure of time—in a large institutional setting. They created a day-long experience, occurring each Wednesday in the term, called “Children Teaching Teachers.” In that program, they combined several courses and broke down conventional uses of time and space in institutional settings, bringing children and their educators into the university to engage with students. At the 1998 conference, their presentation was in the last time slot of the last day. Nonetheless it was crowded, people spilling into the hall, and for many of us across Canada, it was our introduction to Sue Fraser in

person.

After the session, many of us recognized we had heard something unique. How was it unique? Not simply in its content, which was radical enough, but in reflecting a different quality of experience, a different tone or disposition. This disposition was one of humility about what they had done, and enormous yet thoughtful respect for the educators of Reggio Emilia and attempts to learn from them. They were so very careful about what they said about those educators, so considered in their responses to questions, so humble. It was extraordinarily different from any other conference session we had ever attended, and this fact was recognized widely by many of us in attendance.

Sue and Elvira were both retiring the following June 1999. I was so stimulated by their approach in that conference session that I visited them at Douglas College to explore their work and interview them about it. When I visited in June of 2000, Sue had just submitted her manuscript for the first edition of *Authentic Childhood* (Fraser, 2000), which brought this work, and her visits to Reggio Emilia, into the wider public domain of education in North America. *Authentic Childhood* is now in its third edition (Fraser, 2012).

Fraser's provocation

In that 1998 conference session, and in her book, and in an article written on her work for *Canadian Children*, Sue argued, "We've missed the boat [in North America] in putting play at the core of our programme, and educators of Reggio Emilia put relationships at the core"; Sue was "still thinking about that" (Wien, 2000, p. 21). Her work with four different early childhood contexts—the ECE program at Douglas College, a child care and a preschool program on Quadra Island, and the Vancouver Child Study Centre—demonstrated alterations to educators' thinking and practice in ways inspired by Reggio Emilia. Learning to create documentation that makes learning visible and shows why that learning is important, to collaborate in ways that develop teams (rather than divisions of labour), to create provocations (rather than activities with set outcomes), and to remove piecemeal schedules and allow time to be unhurried (rather than timed and heavily scheduled) were some aspects of practice that changed for educators in these settings after working with Sue as mentor.

Sue on play in North America and in Reggio

Carol Anne: Sue talked in our interviews (Wien, 2000) about a difference in thinking about play between our North American view and that of educators in Reggio Emilia. She noted that our view of play is to see it as pretense, a symbolic stance in which one thing stands in for another—children pretend to be something else (p. 22). She thought that play, for the Reggio educators, was influenced by Gianni Rodari and John Dewey. Rodari (1996) treated play as the generation of creative ideas in response to hypothetical situations (suppose the birthday party is for a house). Dewey treated play as creation of a product in response to "playing with" ideas and emotions and producing something that reflected that play. [This was Sue's way of putting it in 2000.] In my opinion [Carol Anne], although both North American and Reggio views support imaginative thinking and both support generating new connections and new relationships, the Reggio view is larger, wider, as it engages both children and educators in thinking (and feeling?) that goes beyond the known and engages a wider world. And the adult is part of the interaction in the Reggio view and removed in the North American, in which children are left uninterrupted.

The key idea here is the difference between our idea of play as looking back into the world of childhood and the idea of play as building relationships that look out into the world. "The [North American] focus on play was consistent with a child development focus on the individual child ... A focus on relationship, however, requires us to look out into the world and consider children's dynamic responses" (Fraser, as cited in Wien, 2000, p. 26).

“I really feel,” said Sue, “that if we could put relationship at the core of our programme, we’d get a better quality programme, and a higher profile in society” (p. 26).

She offered these thoughts 20 years ago.

Sue as a home of safety for others

Carol Anne: From the first moment I heard her speak, then met her in Vancouver six-months later, I found I felt absolutely safe in her presence. Safe in the sense of being accepted as I was, that there was no judgment but a genuine sense of welcome. It strikes me she was not cautious: She took me into her home on that trip without question, took me to Quadra Island to visit the centres and meet educators there. She fed me, housed me, for at least five days. I think those of us who knew her felt her love for us, and our work, her trust in us, and her support for what we were attempting to build for children, families, and educators. This sense of belonging and psychological safety is what we understand must be offered to young children, and it was so lovely to receive it ourselves.

Pat: Sue mentored me. I have a vivid memory of Sue trying to explain Piaget to me during a talk by Eleanor Duckworth at what I believe was the first Canadian Association for Young Children (CAYC) conference in Vancouver in 1976. Piaget’s theories of cognitive development were beginning to have a major impact on early childhood education in Canada at this time. Later, mentoring became more reciprocal as we discussed her book and she read book chapters that I was writing or discussed issues in teaching early childhood education students. In 2002 we collaborated on a piece for *Innovations*, “Trees Dotting the Landscape,” in which we described current Reggio-inspired work in Canada but the difficulty of collaboration due to the distances that separated us across the country.

Multicultural education

Pat: Sue began her work in the area of multicultural early childhood education with research at Sexsmith Preschool for her MA degree, which she completed in 1984. During the 2002 Canadian study delegation to Reggio Emilia, Sue was invited to speak to a professional development session for Reggio educators because the preprimary and infant schools were experiencing an influx of immigrants from other countries, something new to a region where families had lived for generations. In her quiet, unassuming manner, Sue spoke about her work in multicultural settings and what she had learned from these experiences. Sue brought her Reggio-inspired lens to mentoring work at the Marpole Preschool in Vancouver. This was a multicultural program and Sue wrote about and presented this later work until 2007.

Editor

Pat: Sue edited 12 issues (1993–1999) of *Canadian Children*, the journal published by CAYC with the technical assistance of her husband, Hugh. This peer-reviewed journal was *the* journal that represented Canadian early childhood education across the country. Contributors included academics and practitioners, and in this way she contributed to our sense of ourselves in the field of early childhood education and challenged us to consider new directions in the field.

She published one of my first articles on Japanese kindergartens in 1996.

Carol Anne: She published my first article, too, in 1995. This gave me the sense that I could have a place in the Canadian landscape of writers for early childhood. She was so welcoming.

A risk taker? Or one who believed in building for others?

Carol Anne: Sue often extended herself for the good of others. In my 1999 visit, Sue told me she “was questioned by police, as a high school student in South Africa, for teaching Black girls (when education was forbidden them)” (Wien, 2000, p. 21). She did so at the encouragement of a local priest, and perhaps he was the one the police were after. But during a visit with her in 2015 I asked her how she got to England. She told me that after this questioning her parents sent her there, as a 16-year-old; they felt they had to get her out of the country. The police, during the questioning, had sat around a table; they made Sue stand in her dress on top of the table for the questioning, where they could all see up under her skirt.

Generosity without bitterness

Carol Anne: Women of her generation were seldom accepted into doctoral programs, actively discouraged by men—it was all men then—in positions of authority around them. Women’s interests did not match those available to supervise or were not seen as serious. This also happened to Sue following completion of her master’s degree. Given the fact she herself was not permitted to do a doctorate, I found her frequent support of other women, in later years, who were completing dissertations remarkably generous and without rancour. She had much to offer and did not seem to mind that she had never won a prestigious professional position that would give her serious academic credibility.

Pat: I last saw Sue via Skype, on February 28th. She was an audience member supporting a PhD candidate through an oral defense, having read her thesis three times. As the external examiner, I could only wave. So I followed up a week later with a phone call. She was looking forward to her trip to Ireland and Portugal.

The shells

Carol Anne: Sue said she was packing up to return to Vancouver from Quadra Island once and put a big cloth bag of wrapped shells in the trunk of the car for a workshop she was giving upon her return. When she got to the workshop, she lifted the bag of shells onto the table and dumped it out and was shocked to find that she had brought her bag of dirty laundry instead of the shells. Horrified, she swept it all away as fast as possible, and had to make another quick plan for the workshop.

Without guile

Carol Anne: Another time she was to give a workshop for a Head Start program across the Canada/US border in Seattle and had decided it should be on working with wire. Unfortunately, this was shortly after 9/11. She had, in her car, all sorts of materials for the workshop—types of wire, scissors, and wire cutters, and so forth. Had this unassuming grandmotherly woman been duped into transporting dangerous goods into the US? Sue found it quite difficult to convince the border guard of her innocence.

The garden

Carol Anne: Somehow her surroundings reflected something of her personality in a rich, abundant way. I remember the climbing roses, up the back wall of her home with its magnificent view facing the bay. Somehow the view into a far distance reflected the way Sue could look beyond the obvious and think in a bigger, more expansive way, and the creamy, soft-coloured roses reflected the beauty and sense of belonging she conveyed to those in her presence. Hugh was part of that, too, and ready to welcome and be interested in us.

Colour

Pat: When I picture Sue, I see her dressed in blue, usually light blue or aqua, sometimes navy, or maybe pink, possibly in a Liberty flower print blouse. These colours brought out her blue eyes. I have an image of softness, reflecting her gentle and quiet nature. Sue and her colours connect her in my mind with her garden, especially the roses and hydrangeas. Yet in recent photos, she is dressed in a red sweater.

The right arm

Carol Anne: The last time I was with her was in 2015, when Karyn Callaghan, Jason Avery, and I were in BC for presentations, and Sue and Hugh invited us for lunch. Two years earlier, at another conference, she had told me her shoulder was bothering her a lot, and now in 2015 she could not use her right arm. She treated it as one would treat a mosquito bite or small cut covered with a Band-Aid, as needing little concern beyond the help required to serve her food. In other words, she kept her engagement with life bigger and more significant than her problems with a physical body in decline. When I learned she had died in Ireland on her way to Europe, a trip she was very much anticipating, I thought about how she sustained this huge involvement with life—no diminishing what she did—in spite of affliction. To me it is the stance of a warrior woman, someone with enormous courage and enormous attachment to living richly.

Pat: When Sue lost the use of her right arm due to cancer, she continued to draw and paint, teaching herself to do so with her left hand. Talk about tenacity!

Sue read widely and was a member of a book club. Over the years we shared many favourite recommendations. In my last conversation with her, she was looking for a book for her book club discussion. I had just finished reading *The Gown* by Jennifer Robson. My description of the book, a fiction account of two young women who embroidered Queen Elizabeth's wedding gown, struck a chord with Sue. She launched into a story of being in London for Queen Elizabeth's coronation. She had not eaten all day and was beginning to feel rather faint. There was a tent with the most appetizing sandwiches. She grabbed a sandwich to discover Prince Philip giving her a dirty look!

It is a cliché to say Sue was an exceptional and special person who accomplished much with little fanfare and less ego. Her reach was broad, from across North America through her writing and presentations, to lectures in Taiwan, Beijing, and Abu Dhabi. She received recognition for the important contributions she made, receiving the Friends of Children Award from the Canadian Association for Young Children in 1991, The Child Care Award of Excellence for Lifetime Achievement from the B.C. Ministry of Children and Family Development in 2013, and the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014.

She was simply a blessing to us in every way.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Hugh Fraser, their daughter Sally, and their granddaughter Heather for their comments and support in writing this tribute.

References

- Fraser, S. (2000). *Authentic childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom*. Scarborough, ON: Nelson.
- Fraser, S. (2012). *Authentic childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom* (3rd ed.). Toronto, ON: Nelson.
- Rodari, G. (1996). *The grammar of fantasy: An introduction to the art of inventing stories* (J. Zipes, Trans.). New York, NY: Teachers and Writers Collaborative. (Original work published 1972)
- Tarr, P., & Fraser, S. (2002, Winter). Trees dotting the landscape. *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange*, 9(1).
- Wien, C. A. (2000). A Canadian in Reggio Emilia: Fraser's provocation. *Canadian Children*, 25(1), 20–27.