An abstract geometric pattern composed of numerous triangles in various colors including yellow, orange, red, pink, purple, blue, and green, creating a mosaic-like effect.

# LOCATING THE EDUCATIVE POWER OF RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE FIELD OF EARLY CHILDHOOD?

*Theodora Papatheodorou*

*Independent scholar and researcher*

*Email: [theodora.papatheodorou@gmail.com](mailto:theodora.papatheodorou@gmail.com)*

**RCEN conference, 16-18 June 2025. Dublin Ireland**

MY APOREIA  
AND POREIA  
(JOURNEY)  
TOWARDS  
RELATIONAL  
PEDAGOGY

---

I arrived at relational pedagogy rather than intentionally started to researching relational pedagogy

---

---

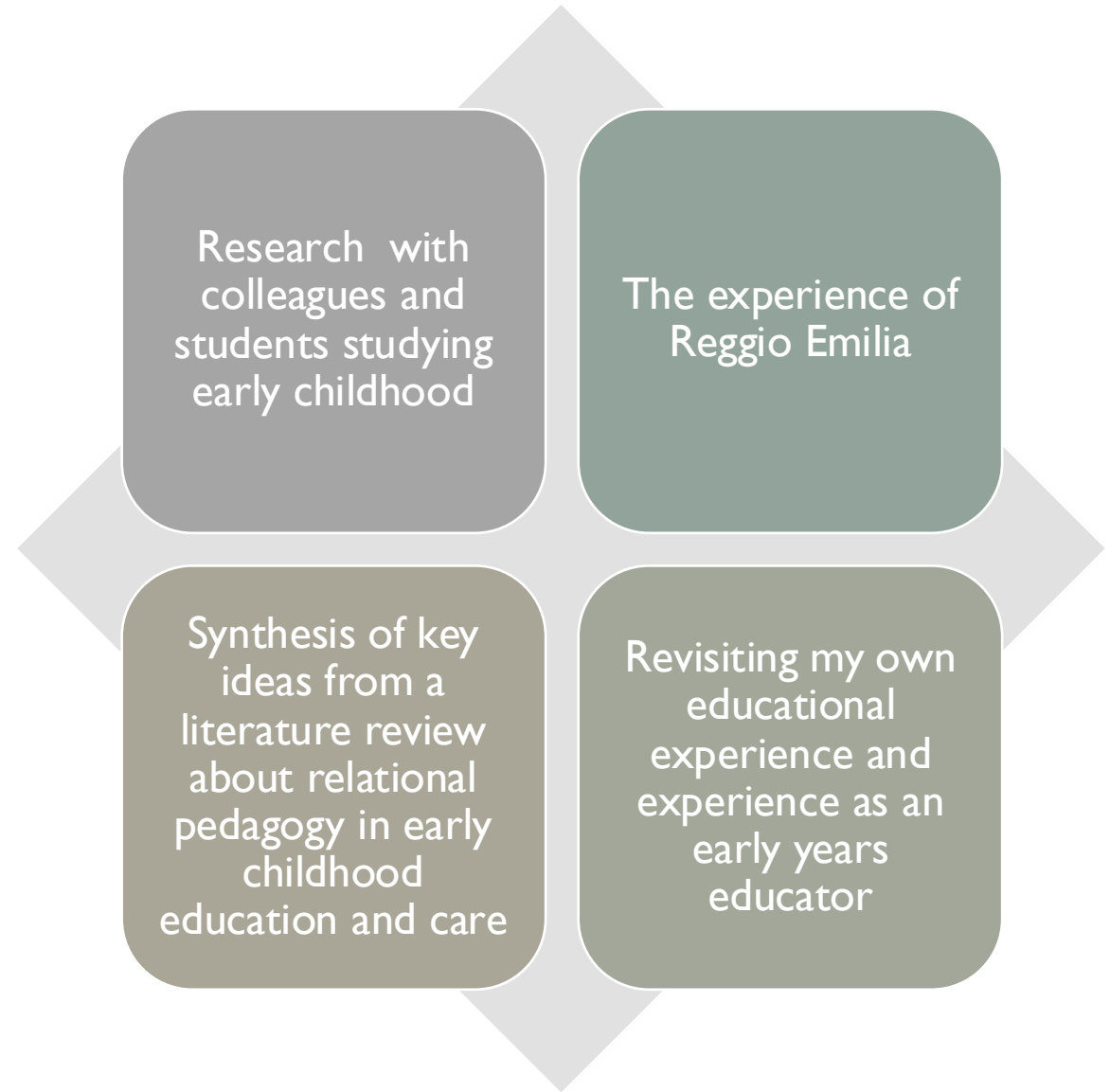
I started from an from an aporetic (questioning) stance, that led me to a poreia (journey) of making sense of my experience

---

---

I returning to my professional roots as an early years educator and my own education foundations

# MY SOURCES OF INSPIRATION AND LEARNING



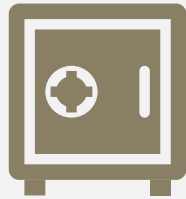
# MY *APOREIA* AND *POREIA* TOWARDS RELATIONAL

Where are my preschoolers in my higher education students? My *aporeia*,  
wonderment, puzzlement and perplexity

Arriving at relational pedagogy, by exploring the incongruent and dissonant  
experience I had as a preschool teacher and higher education tutor

# EXPLORING STUDENT TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

What did our students tell us?



***CONFIDENCE  
BUILDING...***



***DEFINING AND  
REDEFINING LEARNING***

# A JOURNEY OF EXPLORATION AND SELF TRANSFORMATION

Teaching is not some kind of 'input' that ideally should go directly into the mind of the student without any noise, disturbance or transformation.

Teaching is about the construction of a social situation, and the effects of teaching result from the achievements of the students in and in response to this social situation

the learners learn from their participation in a social situation

Biesta, 2004:18

# THE STUDENT TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

## Challenging learning Tasks and situations

- Problem solving tasks
- Addressed as a group
- Groups were randomly selected for each problem-solving activity
- Request solutions, not the solution, substantiated by reading and with group consensus
- Conflict to be resolved by group members

## Process

- Dialogue and group reflection
- Key reading and library resources
- Class discussions and reflection
- Tutor support for unresolved group challenges

## Outcome

- Group problem solving responses and group presentations
- Individual reflection on learning

# Teaching and learning as a relationship

From

Focus on educator-learner relationships

Pursuing individual achievement or making equal contribution

Seeking certainty in knowledge

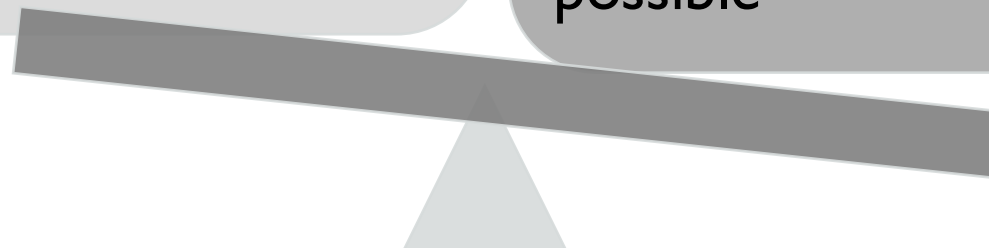
To

Focus on learner - peer relationships

Making individual contribution to collective outcomes

Individual contribution may be unequal but equally important and significant for the collective task

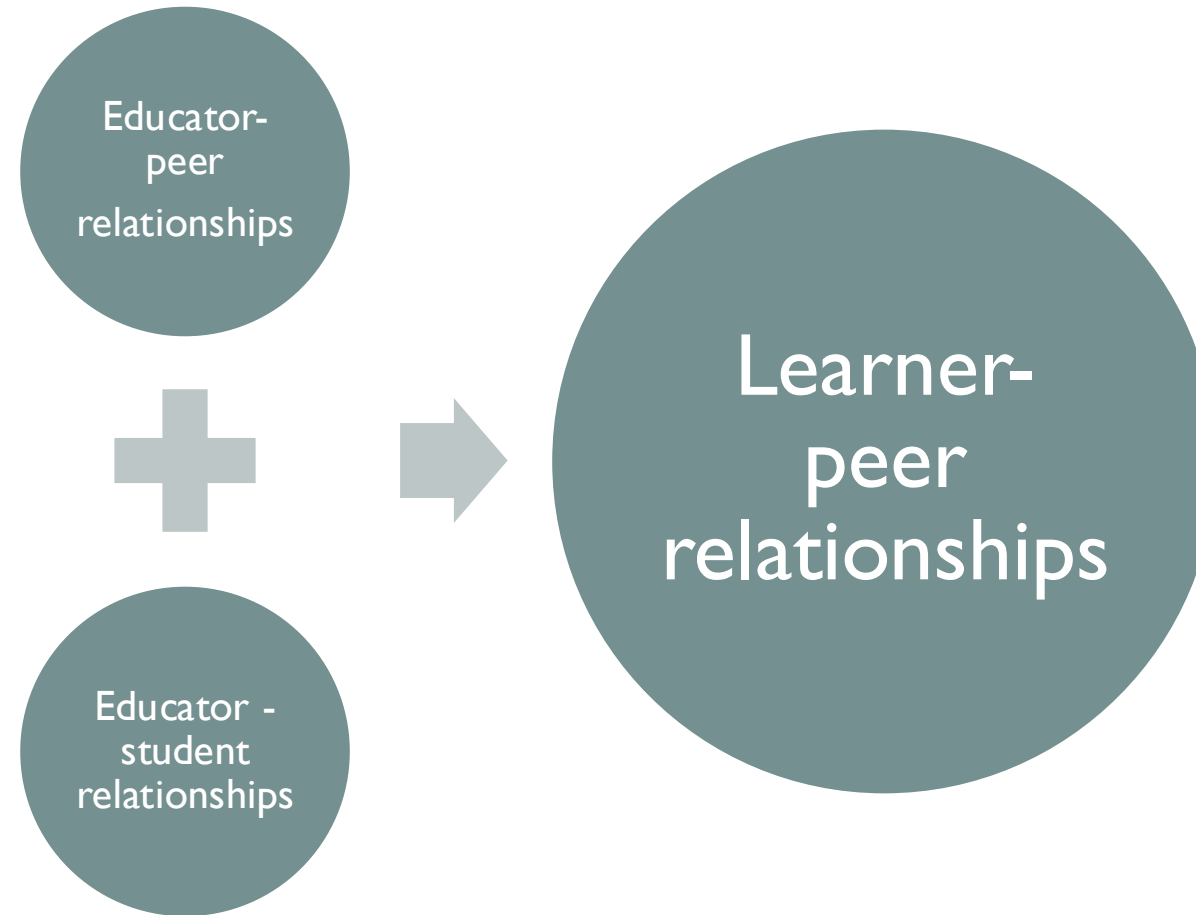
Seeking/exploring what is possible





# The educative power of relational pedagogy

## Shifting locus of control



# THE REGGIO EMILIA EXPERIENCE

## Observation one

Beyond seeking certainty in knowledge  
and outcomes – searching for what is  
possible

Outcomes and knowledges can be changed  
and transformed into something different  
and equally significant

## Observation two

Beyond individual achievement and  
outcome

We may not all contribute in equal ways in  
all situations, but in ways that are equally  
important and significant

# RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY

## Types of relationships

- Relationship formation and relationship finding with the content and context of educational activities
- Relationship formation with others, be it child-educator, child-peer
- Relationship formation through and in the processes of educational activities
- **Relationship formation with the wider social and natural world**

## Constituent dimensions of relational pedagogy

- Affective dimension
- Dialogical communicative exchanges and interactions
- Stimulating, challenging and emotionally safe learning environments
- Educator pedagogical knowledge and competencies
- **An emerging spiritual dimension**

PLAY - THE SPRINGBOARD FOR ENACTING RELATIONAL  
PEDAGOGY

**What  
kind of  
play?**



**Child  
initiated  
and joyful  
play!**

## PLAY - THE SPRINGBOARD FOR ENACTING RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY

Child initiated and motivated play starting from children's curiosity; their puzzlement and wonder about events and situations, and about things; their questioning, their aporeias

Joyful play which brings about a sense of elation, gratification, delight, pleasure and happinesses, being jubilant, ecstatic, exultant, euphoric, and over the moon

# JOYFUL PLAY

- Joy is primarily a relational phenomenon  
(Karjalainen et al., 2019)
- Joy is a performative force, where ‘the inter-action of bodies, objects and energies... transform in and through their relation with each other’ and their ‘becoming is dependent on the relational moves between them.’  
Nordström (2024:81)

- Joy, by definition, is an embodied and visceral experience.
- Children's aporeias and joy set them (and the educators) on a journey (aporeia) of exploration and transformation

# YOGURT MAKING



A casual comment leading to



questions,



Ideas,



Exploration,



Action



Enjoyment



and triggers further ideas



# EDUCATOR – THE CONNECTIVE FIGURE

Attentive listener

Emotionally attuned to  
children's doings

Participating and sharing  
children's their joyfulness

Supports relationship  
formation, not shaping  
directing relationships  
towards a pre-defined and  
pre-determined direction

breaks down the defined  
roles of educator and  
learner, the knower and  
the one who needs to  
know, respectively

PLAY  
OFFERS  
KAIROS FOR  
UNHURRIED  
AND SLOW  
LEARNING

- Kairos (from the Greek word, *καιρός*), understood as the appropriate and favourable time, and the opportune moment, given particular circumstances, to do something
- In Kairos, children learn at their own pace and, as Carlsen and Clark (2022) note, in unhurried and slow manner.

## THE PLAY PROCESSES

---

It is intricate and sophisticated and complex process

---

It is occurring largely in subtle and unconscious ways

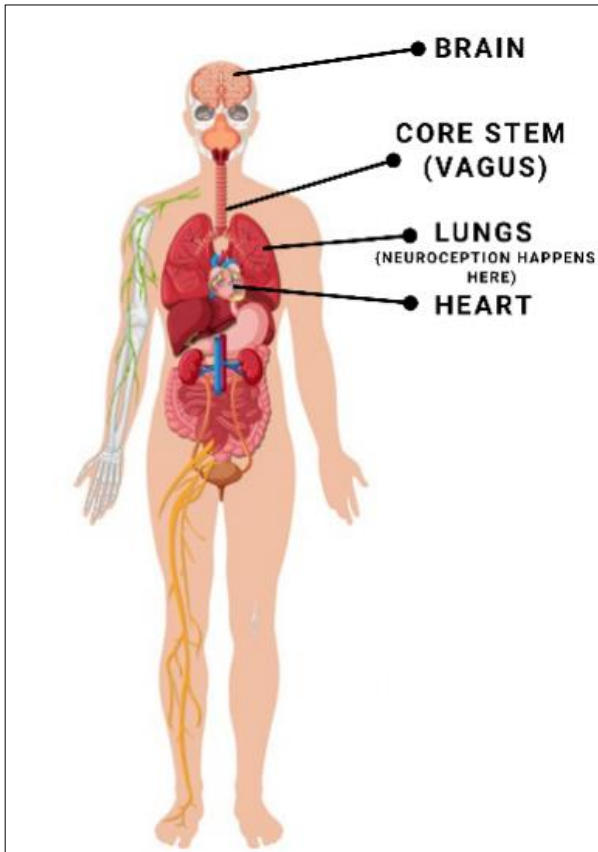
---

It is subject to embodied and visceral experiences and stimuli

---

It defies systems of child assessment and educator accountability

# NEUROCEPTION - UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF PLAY



- The unconscious, subjective and intersubjective processes are often triggered by viscerally experienced stimuli
- Detected by the body's internal organs (such as the heart and lungs) are passed through the core stem onto the brain
- The brain informs the peripheral nervous system to respond and act
- This process, known as neuroception, is subtle, complex and intricate and acts as a mechanism for individuals to evaluate the level of safety or threat posed by external stimuli.

# THE EDUCATIVE POWER OF RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY

In and through  
relational pedagogy  
learners emerge as  
*social, cognitive and  
political* beings



# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS- EXERCISING PHRONESIS

RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY REQUIRES THAT WE,  
EDUCATORS, EXERCISE PHRONESIS

A light gray downward-pointing arrow indicating a flow from the first box to the second.

THIS IS THE THE WEIGHING UP OF DIFFERENT  
INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES, COMPETING AND  
CONFLICTING GOALS IN ANY GIVEN SITUATION;

A light gray downward-pointing arrow indicating a flow from the second box to the third.

TO TAKE DECISIONS THAT ENABLE SELF-  
TRANSFORMATION AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF  
A COMMON GOOD

Relational pedagogy



An ethical stance towards  
our learners and the wider  
social and natural world



With my thanks to all my students - small and big -  
with my thanks for teaching me more than I could  
ever have taught them, and my apologies if I have not  
served all of them and always the way I should have  
done.



My thanks go, too, to all inspirational  
teachers and colleagues whom I met in  
my life



What we leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others

Pericles (495-429) to his troops

THANK YOU



# REFERENCES

- Buber, M. (1937/2013) *I and Thou*. Bloomsbury Revelations.
- Cliffe, J., & Solvason, C. (2023). What is it that we still don't get? – Relational pedagogy and why relationships and connections matter in early childhood. *Power and Education*, 15(3), 259-273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17577438221124296>
- Carlsen, K. & Clark, A. (2022) Potentialities of pedagogical documentation as an intertwined research process with children and teachers in slow pedagogies, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 30:2, 200-212, DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2022.2046838
- Fuchs, T. and de Jaeger, H. (2009). Enactive intersubjectivity. Participatory sense-making and mutual incorporation. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. 8(9), 465-486.
- Karjalainen, S., Hanhimäki, E. & Puroila, A, M. (2019). Dialogues of joy: Shared moments of joy between teachers and children in early childhood education settings. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51(8), pp. 129–143.
- Karjalainen, S. (2021) Doing joy. Performances of joy in children's relations in early childhood and education settings. Doctoral thesis, The university of Oulu
- Malaguzzi, L. (1998). History, ideas and basic philosophy: An interview with Lella Gandini. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini and G. Forman (Eds.), *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections* (2nd ed., pp. 49–97). Ablex Publishing Corporation.

- Nordström, A. (2022). Reimagining joy as a performative force in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 25(1), 80-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491221089332> (Original work published 2024)
- Papatheodorou and J. Moyles (Eds.), *Learning Together in the Early Years: Exploring Relational Pedagogy* (pp. 3–16). Routledge.
- Papatheodorou, T. (2023a) “Relational Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education.” In *Oxford Bibliographies in Education*. Ed. Susan Faircloth. New York: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756810/obo-9780199756810-0301.xml>
- Porges, S. W. ( 2018). Polyvagal theory: A primer. In S. W. Porges and D. Dana (eds). *Clinical Applications of the Polyvagal Theory: The Emergence of Polyvagal-Informed Therapies*. (pp.5-69). WW Norton.
- Redder, B., & White, E. J. (2017). Implicating teachers in infant–peer relationships: Teacher answerability through alteric acts. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 18(4), 422-433. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117742782> (Original work published 2017)
- Trevarthen, C. & Aitken, K. J. (2001). Infant intersubjectivity: Research, theory, and clinical applications. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 42(1), pp. 3–48.