

Study Tours Reveal a New World of Ideas

An interview with Eliana Elias

by Margie Carter

 Meet the Author
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With the multitude of professional development offerings available these days, I've especially valued participating in study tours to see firsthand and learn directly from the experiences and accomplishments of other programs. This idea first came to my attention in the early 1990s when Angela Ferrario began taking study groups to Reggio Emilia to see a very different approach to early childhood education. In the following decades these tours grew exponentially, eventually inspiring U.S. programs that had been studying



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Eliana Elias, a Harvest Resources Associate, started her career as an Early Childhood Educator in 1989, at Mills College in Oakland, California, where she earned a masters degree in Early Childhood Education. She has worked with children, families, and teachers ever since. Eliana currently works as a coach and professional development specialist in the larger San Francisco Bay area. Her interests include dual language acquisition, literacy development, and equity issues. She lives with her husband and two children in the San Francisco Bay area and spends every summer in a small family farm in the state of Espírito Santo, Brazil, where she is fortunate to be able to reconnect with her ancestors' land.



the Reggio approach to offer their own learning tours for others. I confess that initially I was concerned that these tours were just the latest new American fad, with the idea of 'study' taking a back seat. While this was true in some cases, hundreds upon hundreds of North American educators have delved deep into studying the theories and pedagogical practices of their Reggio counterparts, transforming their own thinking and practices, and becoming an inspiration for others. Indeed, that dedication has informed my own learning and I am forever grateful for how inspiration from Reggio has impacted the early childhood landscape in North America.

In those early Reggio study tour years, I confess I was also disturbed by the privileged demographics of programs pursuing inspiration from Reggio, reinforcing the race and class divide that pervades ECE programs in most communities. I wondered why these educators flocking to Reggio-inspired ideas had failed to take up an equally serious study of an anti-bias approach to ECE with the 1989 publication of the *Anti-bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. My early study of the history and context of Reggio ideas uncovered themes of social justice, empowerment, rights, and identity, but it was a while before I heard those themes moved into the spotlight in the U.S.



Photograph by the author

In the meantime, more efforts were made to learn from those outside our U.S. context. Janet Gonzalez-Mena started leading study tours to Budapest, the World Forum Foundation on Early Care and Education took off, and I started traveling to Aotearoa New Zealand, initially invited as a speaker, and then continuing with extended visits to study and encourage other American colleagues to learn from the remarkable ECE system in NZ, with an inspiring social justice history and pedagogical practices. I've been leading small study tours there nearly every year since.

Over time I've come to identify particular elements that make a study tour a transformative experience for participants, including:

- thoughtful preparation on the part of the planners and participants, with focused learning goals.
- an agenda with identified big ideas to be explored in a balance of presentations, center visits, dialogue, and an active reflective guide during the whole experience.
- careful sequencing and pacing in the schedule with time for individual and group reflections.
- support in thinking about bringing inspiration home, inviting others who





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didn't attend into further exploration, study, and possible next steps.

I've been on study tours where some of these elements have been missing and deeper learning was less immediate. Without a reflective guide or ongoing critical friend in the dialogue process, thinking stays more superficial or stuck in discussions of the "what" (what are their ratios, budgets, catalog suppliers), rather than the "why" (why are these particular practices, environments, forms of documentation used). The "what" questions are useful for considerations of practical implementation. But without a deeper understanding of the "why," it's challenging to sustain the tenacity needed to invent our way through inevitable road blocks in trying to guide our work with an expanded vision of what children, families, and staff deserve. A reflective guide creates the momentum to learn more. A critical friend is often essential to this deeper reflection, a respectful friend who

promotes critical thinking, probing for the "why," the underlying assumptions, values, beliefs, and theories. The word *critical* here means someone who is essential to the learning process.

A Study Tour Story

For a firsthand story of how a study tour can impact one's thinking and practice, I've asked Eliana Elias to describe her experience. Eliana has found the New Zealand ECE approach so inspiring that she's participated in two of our study tours and plans to continue her learning and assume more leadership for the tours. Continually asking, "How can I account for what I'm seeing" has spurred her into deeper study of the history, philosophy, and principles underpinning what she finds an impressive counterpoint to the typical ECE program in the U.S. Getting to the "why" has opened up new questions and possibilities for her own work as a coach and consultant in publicly-

funded and community-based preschool settings.

Margie: With all the demands on your time, what prompted you to learn about the Aotearoa New Zealand Early Childhood system?

Eliana: Let me offer a little background as I answer this question. I have been working in the early childhood field in California for the past 27 years, first as a preschool teacher and then as a college instructor, consultant, and most recently as a coach and professional development specialist. In each role I tried to develop my understandings and myself as an advocate and leader in this profession.

Margie: I have to interrupt to say that is a remarkable statement you've just made. I seldom hear people talk about developing understandings of themselves as an aspect of their professional development. Typically, professional

development is viewed as getting more information about some topic that is current in the field. That, of course, is important, but self-knowledge is a critical component of becoming a stronger advocate and leader. I so appreciate you highlighting this as the context for understanding your history and choices.

Eliana: I believe learning is deeply personal and political. Viewing ourselves as active participants helps us determine what will be of value to us. In the case of my desire to learn more about Aotearoa New Zealand, there were some critical moments that helped pique my interest. In 2008, the State of California released the *California Preschool Learning Foundations*, a document intended to guide ECE professionals in thinking of all aspects of children's learning. During the years prior to the publication of the document, I volunteered in a few of the focus groups that read the first drafts and provided feedback to the state. During those meetings, I remember feeling ambivalent. I knew we needed to come together as a community to generate a common language around the needs of our youngest learners, but something was missing. The *Foundations* were thorough. They organized the content of ECE programs into several areas of development (Social-emotional Development, Language and Literacy, English-language Development, Mathematics, Physical Development). The examples were clear, and I could not say that I disagreed with any of it. Lots of good information, I thought. And, even though I proceeded to disseminate information about the *Foundations* amongst my students, and those I coach, I continued to feel that something was missing.

As I discussed the *Foundations* with colleagues and friends, I felt that I was getting closer to identifying the reasons: The *Foundations* were not really capturing the true beauty and magic

of the early years. The lists of targeted developmental steps sounded strangely devoid of emotional connection, of poetical vision and of heart.

Margie: Yes, I know what you mean about these kinds of documents. They often sound like bureaucratic regulations, rather than a call to discover and participate in the remarkable experience of supporting a young child's learning and development, beyond their family and into the world that will help shape and encourage their participation as citizens.

Eliana: Yes, I longed for a common language to help us, as a community of educators, see our job with children as a complex web of relationships, and not as a list of 'behaviors.' As an educator, I had gone back to our past, to the origins of our profession, and found inspiration in people like Dewey, Montessori, Caroline Pratt, and others. I had visited Reggio Emilia and had also found inspiration in how educators there carry a strong history of commitment to children, beautiful environments, and their image of children. I knew that there would be other models outside our field of vision... models able to inspire us to connect to children in a different way. Then I began to hear about the Aotearoa New Zealand context through my friends at Harvest Resources Associates. Their enthusiasm in describing their study tour experiences turned my attention to the NZ national curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which was developed to express aspirations for children's learning and identity development, all within the context of honoring the rights of children, while recognizing the historical Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, which acknowledged that Aotearoa New Zealand would be a bicultural country with equal rights between the indigenous Maori and their colonizers.

Unlike any other document I had read before, this simple and short curriculum

framework captured some of the ideas and thoughts I was unable to articulate, even though I sensed they were missing from other documents. Rather than being organized around developmental milestones, *Te Whāriki* is organized through a metaphorical image of a 'woven mat,' a cultural symbol, with strands and principles that are beautifully interconnected, to form an interlaced pattern — a mat for all educators and cultures to stand on. Rather than stating the most obvious skills that children need to acquire in the early years — physical development or social skills — this document lists four broad principles: Empowerment, Holistic Development, Family and Community, and Relationships. These principles are interwoven with five strands or goals: Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication, and Exploration. As I read this curriculum document, I had a clear image of children and adults working together to form strong communities. In order to assess whether educators are achieving these goals, they are encouraged to think of questions that the children themselves might be asking:

Belonging: "Do you know me?"

Well-being: "Can I trust you?"

Exploration: "Do you let me fly?"

Communication: "Do you hear me?"

Contribution: "Is this place fair for us?"

Reading this, I could not help but wonder: Would teachers here in California be able to honestly answer YES to these questions if children were to ask them? And, would those who were supposed to be inspired by the *Foundations* and the subsequent *California Early Childhood Curriculum Frameworks* be able to extract such meaningful questions from reading those documents? Sadly, I concluded that many of our children

(and teachers) hear a resounding NO to most of these questions... not once, not twice, but during their whole tenure as preschoolers and preschool teachers. This was a sobering thought. I knew that I had to travel to New Zealand, because I wanted to find out if it was possible for a whole country to begin answering YES when children ask such questions. The *Te Whāriki* curriculum document has heart, and, at the same time, it presents us with a strong intellectual model to think more deeply about the meaning of early childhood. I had to see how the document connected to the practice. I was compelled to learn more.

Margie: I so remember you on each of the two study tours you joined, in 2013 and 2016. That's an enormous commitment of time and resources. What questions have each of the visits prompted for you? How have your perspectives changed?

Eliana: In 2013, I was looking forward to seeing in practice the strands and principles laid out in the *Te Whāriki*. I looked for and found such evidence in each of the centres we went to. In fact, I was overwhelmed by the most visible aspects of the curriculum: the schools were beautiful, the teachers were engaged, and, more importantly, the children were confident, articulate, and very friendly. I was also inspired to see that the indigenous Maori culture was embedded in many of the practices present in the programs, not as an 'add on' but as an integral part of the evolving Aotearoa New Zealand identity. In fact, the *Te Whāriki* itself is deeply representative of Maori pedagogy, the way children are embraced, respected, and taught who they are and what they will benefit from learning. I also spent a great deal of time during my first visit trying to understand the impact made by Learning Stories, which have been adopted as a formative assessment tool. The Learning Story approach is, at first glance, a simple tool. Yet, once you study

this use of narrative documentation as an assessment approach, you cannot ignore its potential complex contributions to teacher development, family engagement, and the children's identity development.

Seeing the Power of Learning Stories

Margie: The Learning Story approach is often a concrete tool people want to take back to their work settings and begin using. I'm glad you didn't just 'copy' or appropriate this idea, but rather undertook a study to see how this tool could inform your work.

Eliana: Yes, after I returned from my first visit, I delved into Learning Stories and began to use them as a way to bring together heartfelt observations and honest intellectual exploration in place of assessment checklists. Learning Stories are genuinely a strength-based tool and using this approach requires observing for competencies, new insights, curiosities and questions that provoke deeper thinking. I also began to write Learning Stories to the teachers whom I coached. Often, teachers who received a Learning Story shared that it was the first time they read about their effectiveness as a teacher. The impact of this assessment tool can also be transformative in the narrative of programs that have a history of not seeing their own value and contribution. Once a Learning Story illuminates ONE aspect of a child's, a teacher's, or a program's effectiveness, other moments can become visible too, opening the gates for positive transformations.

Margie: So true. Once you start down the path of trying to find new insights into children or how the environment or materials might be impacting their engagement, you are working with those "why" questions, rather than "what" might need 'fixing' in this child. I'm glad you discovered how writing Learning

Stories can pique curiosity and lead to a transformation in HOW we see things.

A High Trust Model

Margie: Beyond incorporating Learning Stories, are there other changes in your practice that have been influenced by your study of the NZ approach to ECE?

Eliana: I have made many adjustments in the way I work with teachers. Before going to New Zealand, for instance, I paid a great deal of attention to how I could support children's healthy identity, but I somewhat neglected considering how my work could impact the teachers' own identity. As a coach, I am now much more aware of the connection between developing a healthy, self-aware, and curious identity in teachers and our ability to develop that for children.

Reflections on the work of educators in Aotearoa New Zealand has made me much more aware of the power that Early Childhood Programs have in fostering healthy relationships with families, places, and materials.

The NZ early childhood system is referred to as a 'high trust model.' Children and teachers are encouraged to take physical, emotional, and intellectual risks on behalf of their learning. Now I am more willing to take risks and to allow children to take risks, too. I also strive to see the connections between larger socio-cultural contexts and how changes manifest themselves in small practices in the classroom.

Seeing the Restorative Justice Model

Eliana: During my second visit, I was able to think more of the larger context. I went into this tour with a broader question in mind: "What are the systems, cultural struggles, political debates, and social forces that can push a society to consider the unique needs

of their youngest citizens?" Before I went, I read more about the history of Aotearoa New Zealand, and how the encounters between the Maori and the British, in some ways, paralleled the history of injustices in other nations. More specifically, I had Brazil (my native country) and the U.S. (my adopted country) in mind.

In both of these countries, the injustices done to the indigenous populations remain outside of the public debates. The current political discourse in Brazil, for instance, is embarrassingly against indigenous Brazilians; there are, in fact, open discussions about doing away with the few preserved indigenous Brazilian lands left. In an interview conducted on May 26, 2016 by the Brazilian journalist Bruno Vicente with Brazilian Minister of Agriculture Blairo Maggi, the minister, stated his view: "It's not fair, putting a regular family out in order to help out some Indians."

Margie: Horrifying as such a statement is, this sentiment is not unique to politics in Brazil.

Eliana: Yes, such ignorance and callousness is also visible in policies implemented here in the U.S. The current climate in some U.S. states (including California) for instance, is very much against the preservation of home languages in favor of English-only education, an ongoing trend that deprives recent immigrants from keeping their connections with their families and continues to decrease native languages' chances of surviving against the power of the English language.

In contrast, New Zealand has shown us the power of the Restorative Justice model, which intends to mitigate the injustices of the past by promoting social policies that address some of these injustices. I hope I am not

painting a naïve interpretation of the New Zealand context. Many of our NZ friends would be the first to tell us that their system is far from perfect and their Restorative Justice journey still has a long way to go. However, their critical look at the past and their ability to recognize that Maori culture is a strong and powerful element in their national identity has resulted in many positive steps towards a more just society. The return to honoring the Treaty of Waitanga, signed in 1840 for instance, resulted in the restoration of some significant ancestral lands back to the Maori control. The valuing of the Maori language, once threatened with extinction, has resulted in strengthening the use of Maori language, the creation of Maori TV channels, radio shows, and 'language nests,' or full language immersion schools.

Margie: It sounds like this history came alive more fully for you during your return to NZ.

Eliana: The way in which these values show up in Early Childhood Programs was apparent to me during my second visit. We had a chance to visit two sites designed specifically to support Maori families and children and we had a chance to hear firsthand accounts from two Maori educators about their own experiences and struggles in reclaiming their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. And, in all of the schools, we saw growing evidence of appreciation and respect for the values, traditions, and history of Maori People. These lessons, for me, go beyond my responsibilities as an educator, and help me see myself as a potential agent of change in both Brazil and the U.S. It is not enough, I have concluded, to advocate for beautiful classrooms, well-prepared teachers, and varied resources. We must use a wider lens to help us identify the sources of inequality and injustices in our society, so we can design programs that don't mirror our societies as they

are now, but rather aim to build programs that project the best of what we can be.

More Learning Opportunities

Margie: You're coming on our next study tour in 2017. How are you thinking about a learning focus for yourself for this third visit?

Eliana: There are so many things I still want to learn about. One of them is the intersection between Maori pedagogy and that of Reggio Emilia. Most of the schools we visited in New Zealand were inspired by Reggio, but also reiterated that their strong sense of commitment to 'the ones before us' comes directly from Maori values. The idea of the family as the center of the educational experience is also present in both models. I am also curious about the strong commitment to an educational experience that is deeply rooted in the need for humans to develop a sense of place and a connection to their natural world. I want to explore more of this notion of a Place-based Education, which I've learned about through the writing and work of Sobel (2004) and witnessed firsthand in all of the early childhood centers we visited in Aotearoa New Zealand. This sense of place is vividly expressed in all aspects of Maori culture. When they introduce themselves, for instance, Maori people tell you of "their ancestral line, their mountain, their river, and their canoe," a practice that roots them over and over to their sense of place in the world.

In addition, I would like to learn more about the teacher development programs, and the systems designed to provide continuous professional development opportunities.

Margie: I'm thrilled that with all the knowledge and inspiration you've acquired from these study tours, you are transitioning into a more intentional leadership role as a planner and reflective guide. We intentionally keep these study

tours small in numbers, no more than 30 people, and try to include a good balance of culture, age, and ECE job roles within the group. Over time I've more deliberately focused on processes for deeper reflection and leadership development by setting up ongoing Communities of Practices for small group dialog guided by facilitators using our Thinking Lens® protocol (see Curtis et al., 2013 in references).

Eliana: Yes, this is such an effective way to support reflection and emerging leaders. I am very interested in what happens to us as a diverse group of Americans visiting a different context. During the study tours one of the things that is so wonderful to experience is how quickly each group becomes a community of learners together. Most of the participants are in New Zealand for the first time, while a few, like myself, are return visitors. The way you, Margie, frame the discussions, and ask provocative questions, helps us become critical learners. The identity of the group evolves and changes as the week progresses and, by the end, we are all transformed. Remarkably, each of us has somehow contributed to that transformation. In addition to being in dialog with the whole group, I love spending time in the same small Communities of Practice we form, exploring ideas, asking questions, and experiencing the value of protocols to get deeper in our co-construction of knowledge. I think during my third visit I will be more attentive to the group's dynamics and will be asking myself about additional ways to amplify the experiences and voices of the participants. Moving between the skills of group facilitation and being a critical (meaning 'essential') friend for an individual participant's learning is an important part of my leadership development.

Learning Across the Globe

Margie: In summary, Eliana, how would you summarize the value of going across

the globe to learn about such a different context?

Eliana: I have always seen myself as a lifelong learner. I view early childhood theories and practices as my main field of study, and I also strive to understand the forces influencing our field. When I think of my own learning, I think of the image of Jerome Brunner's spiraling curriculum. In *The Process of Education*, Brunner explains, "A curriculum as it develops should revisit basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them." Since I am responsible for my own learning, I often ask myself how I might go about revisiting the 'basic ideas' of my field of study and offering myself the opportunities to see them in a 'widening spiral,' revisiting them over and over from different angles and different perspectives. My colleagues help me do this... new books and articles help me do this... reflection on my own practice helps me do this... but putting myself in a completely new situation, with culturally different perspectives, pushes me in a different way.

Margie: Can you offer an example of this?

Eliana: Take the basic idea of social and emotional development, for instance. In much of our professional literature and conference offerings here in the U.S., teachers are given strategies to help children with behavior management, to help them learn problem solving or self-regulation skills. Teachers are given lists of what to say or do when children 'don't follow the rules.' What I experienced in Aotearoa New Zealand has widened my perspectives to consider practices that authentically connect children to each other, their teachers, their families, their ancestors/heritage, and their natural world.

Around the globe children are encouraged to take risks and to experience

themselves as competent beings. Offering those experiences, in my view, is more powerful than the strategies so commonly offered in our context. As I 'widen' my learning spiral, I am better able to support children and families in my context, bringing in fresh ideas and practices that might enhance my own work here. Coincidentally, the spiral, represented by the Silver Fern frond, or in Maori, the Koru, has a special meaning in Aotearoa New Zealand. Its inward, circular shape has been used in that context to symbolize new life, growth, a fresh start, and new beginnings. Maori culture is full of symbolisms, imageries and song, languages that go beyond our rational minds, and help us connect to the many other human ways to communicate complex ideas. I love learning about this. These experiences enrich my practice and my life.

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