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The Reggio Emilia Project: Looking at the Teacher as Researcher Through the  
Social Constructivist Early Child Care Centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy

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The Reggio Emilia early childhood education project, now world-renowned, started off as a result of the vision and determination of one man, Loris Malaguzzi, and the commitment of one northern Italian city, Reggio Emilia, to making his vision real. Malaguzzi, like many other Italians, had experienced the brokenness caused by World War II. He felt that the education system in Italy could and should do better. He felt that the Italian nation and the Italian people needed to improve their educational system so that the grip of Fascism, which had taken hold of Italy under Mussolini, would never capture the nation again. Children were the key to this new future and Malaguzzi, based on his readings of psychologists and educational theorists such as John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, thought he knew how to begin to make changes. He believed heart and soul in the social constructivist approach to education in which children learn from and through others. In the words of Carlina Rinaldi:

The emphasis of our educational approach is placed not so much on the child in the abstract sense, but on each child in relation to other children, teachers, parents, his or her own history and the societal and cultural surroundings. Relationships, communications, and interactions sustain our educational approach in its complexity. (Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1988, p. 115)

The question that remained for Malaguzzi, however, in the beginning was: How can we begin to implement these ideas? One of the solutions that the educators came up with in the Reggio Emilia schools was that children would not be told what to do. Instead they

would help each other begin to figure out solutions, one of which we described above as the social constructivist approach. Malaguzzi and the other educators who worked with him began to implement these solutions with the founding of the first Reggio Emilia pre-school opened in 1963. This pre-school served four- to six- year-old children and others soon followed. In the 1970s, Reggio Emilia also began to open infant childhood centers for children from birth to age three.

It was in these schools that the educators of Reggio Emilia, Italy, began to put social constructivist principles into practice to help answer the question that was on all of their minds: How can we better help children learn? One way they implemented social constructivist principles was the way they structured their schools. They felt that people learned best from others, therefore, people other than educators should be involved in the running of the schools. They set up their schools in order to involve the town, the parents and the educators who could all work with and learn from each other and who would all form an integral part of the Reggio Emilia school system. The educational system in Reggio Emilia is set up so that a public official, called as *assessore*, appointed by the mayor of Reggio Emilia, is in charge of the schools. Beneath the mayor is a director of early childhood education and a director of the pedagogical team. Beneath this director of the pedagogical team are several *pedagogisti*, each of which is responsible for coordinating the educational aspects of several different schools. Beneath each *pedagosista* are the *atelieristi*, teachers trained in art education. Each school has an *atelierista*, who serves to support the curriculum in their respective schools. Each school also has teachers, and because the Reggio Emilia schools are committed to the principles of social constructivist learning, there is always more than one teacher in each classroom.

The system is known as *co-education*, where everyone helps everyone else teach and learn.

Another place where co-education takes place is among the children themselves. For example when students at the Anna Frank school were working on a dinosaur project, one of the problems that emerged was how to measure 27 meters when they did not have a meter stick that was 27 meters long. In the end, the children, by working with each other and the teacher, realized that they could use plastic rods that were each 1-meter long to determine how long 27 meters would be. The social constructivist approach means not only that children learn from each other but also from their environment. The Reggio Emilia schools are constructed in such a way that the environment contributes to learning. There are mirrors everywhere so that children can look at and learn from their reflections. In addition, each school tries to construct what the Reggio Emilia educators refer to as an *amiable environment*, where children, educators and parents can feel at ease. This means that the Reggio Emilia schools are built much like an Italian city in which each school has a *piazza* or central gathering place which Reggio educators describe as “the place of encounters, friendships, games and other activities that complete those of the classroom” (Edwards et al., 1988, p.64). In addition, each school has an *atelier* or workshop, which is supplied with various kinds of materials that can be used to facilitate student expression such as paint, clay and paper. This room is described by Malaguzzi as “a place for manipulating or experimenting with separate or combined visual languages” ((Edwards et al., 1988, p. 64). These amiable schools were built in contrast to the old schools, which Malaguzzi felt to be unsatisfactory and answer the question: What can we do to create a more friendly learning environment? Part of this

environment includes not only the structure of the building but also the attitudes of the teachers and staff who become almost as close to the children as their families are.

The belief in the social constructivist approach also means that interactions with and in the community are a key part of the educational experience for the children of the Reggio Emilia schools. In one Reggio Emilia school, visits to a local cooperative supermarket provided much educational impetus. Based on their visits to this store the children did multiple drawings, some of which showed the layout of the store, others of which depicted the cash registers. In addition, children shopped at the supermarket and interviewed the manager there. For the students of the Reggio Emilia, visits to locations outside of the school aren't just day-away field trips. Instead, they are a key part of the educational experience.

This incorporation of real life experiences into the educational curriculum brings us to another key belief of the Reggio Emilia educators. They believed that one of the major problems with the Italian educational system of the past was its hierarchical nature in which children were expected to do as they were told without questioning anything. It was this educational system that may have led to the docile attitudes of so many Italians as they were led to Fascism and war. So at Reggio Emilia, one of the things that educators want children to do, as reflected in the video we watched, is to question everything, resist authority and learn to figure out problems by working them out for themselves rather than being told what to do. This is one of the reasons that the educators use the project approach so frequently, so students can work together to find answers to educational problems. For example, one of the projects students at the La Villetta School engaged in was going out and exploring how Reggio Emilia changes during rainstorms.

This project involved taking children out to the city and letting them take in the city during a dry time. The students also took pictures and looked at both places they were familiar with and places they were not and formed hypotheses about how rain would change these places. The children collected tools to try to help them measure the effects of rain and then went out in the rain to gather their data. Some of the things the students observed were: “how people changed their speed and posture in walking, how the shining reflections and splash from the puddles changed the streets, how the sound of raindrops differed” (Edwards et al., 1988, p. 166-167) depending on where it was falling. The Reggio educators stumbled into this practice of research in their question: How can we continually create a high quality, high interest-learning environment for our students?

This illustration of the rain project brings us to another key belief of Reggio Emilia educators, the child as *present citizen*. One of the phrases that you will often hear spoken by Reggio educators is “the rights of the child.” Malaguzzi says, “We wanted to recognize the right of each child to be a protagonist and the need to sustain each child’s curiosity at a high level” (Edwards et al., 1988, p. 52). What this means is that the educators at Reggio Emilia believe that children, even young children, are capable of participating actively in their own education. They do not need to be told what to do and what to think. Instead they can discover what they should do, how they should act, by examining the phenomena around them both inside and outside the classroom. They can discover how light and shadow work, how the weather transforms their city, how to represent the inner workings of a dinosaur. These children, the educators of Reggio Emilia believe, are even capable of building large 27-meter dinosaurs out of the resources available to them in their school. The astounding success of the Reggio Emilia educators

on many of their projects seems to justify their continued optimism. This practice helps answer the question: How can we respect the rights of all children and encourage children to fulfill their responsibilities of present citizenship?

Another solution to the question of: How can we create a better education system for our children? For the Reggio Emilia educators has been, get rid of pre-packaged curriculum, something Malaguzzi seems to have a particular dislike for. Malaguzzi believed that one of the things that was inadequate about traditional state-run schools was that they engaged in “pushing prepackaged knowledge” (Edwards et al., 1988, p. 50). Instead the educators at Reggio Emilia believe in *progettazione*, or flexible planning. In flexible planning, in contrast to standards-based learning, teachers set general objectives but not specific goals. “Instead they formulate hypotheses of what could happen on the basis of their knowledge and previous experiences” (Edwards et al., 1988, p. 113). Teachers then document with research what does happen. Just as the students learn through researching different phenomena and trying different strategies so, too, do the teachers continue to learn through their use of flexible planning. Because the teachers are committed to this approach, it allows them to more fully integrate children’s insights into the teaching and learning process. Carlina Rinaldi, Pedagogical Director at Reggio Emilia notes, “We embrace an approach based on adults listening rather than speaking” (Edwards et al., 1988, p.115). For Reggio, then research has arisen out of the question: How can we become better listeners to and learners from our children? The adults listen to document the students’ research, and the students then feel that what they are doing is important to their teachers at Reggio Emilia, as indeed it is. The students work is displayed everywhere throughout their schools so students can see that the work they are

doing, the learning they are doing, matters. Teachers at Reggio Emilia also listen to see where the children are in their own educational development. The teachers at Reggio Emilia believe that students learn through *intellectual conflict* so they seek to introduce possibilities that students may not have thought of before in order to help the students learn. In fact, the educators at Reggio believe that intellectual conflict is a key aspect of the learning process. As one observer notes, “The work in Reggio Emilia asks us to view conflict as a social event—even an enjoyable process” (Edwards et al., 1988, p.301) as children learn to discover events for themselves. Teachers also pay attention to when students have reached a *cognitive knot*, a problem that they cannot solve using their existing schemes. They try and help the students make new discoveries but the students, not the teachers, must make these discoveries. As Malaguzzi said, “The objective of education is to increase possibilities for the children to invent and discover” (Edwards et al., 1988, p. 82-83). It is in response to the question, how can we create these opportunities? that the Reggio educators began to look to using non-written means of expression to help children articulate their thoughts and feelings, and it is because of this that art and graphic representation plays a key role in the educational process at Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi believed that educators should not allow young children’s limited language abilities to get in the way of their communication of their thoughts. Therefore students are encouraged to represent their discoveries and feelings in many different ways – by drawing pictures, making maps, and building sculptures, among other ways. At Reggio, children are encouraged to represent their thoughts in many mediums, and all along the way as children are working, teachers document what the students are doing, thinking and feeling. They write down their words, they take pictures of the students, and

they take notes. Throughout the process, as students are learning, so are teachers. As Malaguzzi notes, “Teachers must leave behind an isolated, silent mode of working that leaves no traces. Instead, they must discover ways to communicate and document the children’s evolving experiences at school” (Edwards et al., 1988, p. 69). The purpose of this documentation is multi-faced. On the one hand, it helps parents and teachers see how the students are doing so they can plan projects and come up with ideas that will continue to help them learn. On the other hand, it helps the teachers as researchers to continue to discover new things about their students and the education process in general. As Malaguzzi notes, “We had to preserve our decision to learn from children, from events, and from families to the full extent of our professional limits, and to maintain a readiness to change points of view so as to never have too many certainties” (Edwards et al., 1988, p. 52). Reggio Emilia educators developed this viewpoint in opposition to what they saw as the failed educational system of the past, the one that proved to be inadequate to society by leading it to war. Reggio educators also saw that society was constantly changing, and one of the demands that the Reggio Emilia system tried to meet at its inception was the need for adequate childcare for women who were beginning to enter the workforce. As society continues to change and as the children change as part of that society, the educators of Reggio Emilia will, they believe, be able to adapt to those changes as well because they have not remained stagnant. They have not, unlike some educators in schools elsewhere, been using the same laminated lesson plan year after year for the past 30 years. Instead they have been watching as various societal changes have manifested themselves in the needs and skills of the children they see everyday in their schools. As they continue to see these changes, the educators continue to ask themselves:

How can we respond to them? And lastly and above all they ask themselves: How can we continue to help students learn in light of a changing world? And so, in this fashion, the work of the teachers as researchers at Reggio Emilia continues.

### Critique of the Reggio Emilia Project

One of the things I find to be unique about the Reggio Emilia project is the cultural context that it grew up in. The Reggio Emilia region already had a tradition of liberal thought. Then came World War II and the general disillusionment of the European people after it. On top of that came the cultural upheaval of the 60s and 70s. In Italy it seems to have led to real change. In the United States, however, it seems to have led almost to the opposite. While some change did come for a time in the US during the 60s and 70s, it seems that now the United States has become almost like the Fascist culture that Malaguzzi was reacting against. We are currently in the midst of a war of questionable justification just as the Europeans under Mussolini were, but the majority of America, citing moral issues in the recent election, seems to be more concerned with returning to “traditional” or what might more aptly be called reactionary moral values rather than trying to adapt to the changing nature of American society. As I was going through the Reggio Emilia book for my paper and watching the movie, one of the things that really struck me was the real commitment the people of Reggio Emilia have to creating and maintaining a good education system. This commitment to a good education system is not based on income, as it tends to be so often in the US, but is instead open to anyone (or as many people as the much sought-out early childcare centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia can serve).

One of the things that I really admire about the Reggio Emilia project is that it was created in response to real societal needs such as the need of women to have good daycare so they could join the workforce. Here in America, we still have not recognized that daycare can be a good, high-quality educational opportunity for children. Instead, good high-quality daycare is seen as something that is a luxury available only to those who can afford it. In Reggio Emilia, good high-quality daycare is seen as a right. In contrast, here in the United States, there is still much antipathy about women even being in the workforce full-time. You tend to hear conservative commentators talk about all of the problems of the United States being attributable to the breakdown of the family. This usually implies that all would be well again, crime and AIDS rates and teenage pregnancies would go down, if only mom would return to the home and be like Donna Reed again so dad could be the sole provider again, and then the kids would all be okay again if only mom paid attention to them. In contrast to this attitude to daycare, which sees it as something negative and impersonal that hinders child development, the educators of Reggio Emilia see daycare as something positive and personal, something which the family is involved in and a part of, something that contribute to and foster, rather than inhibit, the growth of the child. Daycare is not where you go because you have to, but instead it is a warm, safe environment where you can develop real relationships with your teachers. As Carol Ann Wien notes in her book review of *Bringing Learning to Life*, “The mainstream North American approach to education remains an industrialized, standardized approach based on the underlying metaphor of machine production.” In contrast to the amiable schools of Reggio Emilia, our schools are, at times, machine-like and barren. Oftentimes the walls are blank or filled with things

that students have to learn such as the alphabet. Sometimes, inspirational sayings decorate the walls, but rarely do we fill the walls of our schools with the data that we have gathered from our students such as student pictures, student comments, and student work as the educators of Reggio Emilia do. Instead, in response to problems in the educational system, we have just piled on more standards. Not only that, now with *No Child Left Behind*, our solution is to take away money from schools that are already failing in the first place. Sometimes I think the qualitative research-based Reggio Emilia approach could never work in America because Americans are too obsessed with trying to quantify things. Other times, I think we desperately need to try it or just try something to make the educational system here more equal, to give poor children some kind of chance instead of sending them into inadequate failing schools which half of them will never graduate from. Even if they do, they have likely been ill-prepared, often lacking the life and job skills needed to survive in a society where a college education is almost a necessity, unless you are a prodigy like Bill Gates, to get a job.

I feel in some ways great nostalgia for the Reggio Emilia approach because it really reminded me of my childhood. I grew up in an Italian American family being cared for not only by my parents but also by aunts, my Nonas, my babysitters who were frequently cousins or neighbors, and by, to some extent my teachers at my schools. One of the memories I have of childhood that the video evoked is meals. When it showed the meals at Reggio Emilia, it reminded me of family meals we used to have with was my dad, my cousins, and my aunts and uncles and I all sitting around the kitchen table or outside on the porch at my Nona's when she was still alive, eating and talking, just enjoying life and not being tied to time. That is where everyone would come after

Saturday Mass, and Nona would have bread and lunchmeats and provolone and sometimes cookies or cakes or whatever spread out on the table and everyone would sit around and talk and eat, and she would say, “Manga!” and encourage everyone to eat more.

Ironically, I feel like the one school system in the US that does a good job approximating the Reggio Emilia school system is the Catholic School system or at least it use to. The Catholic school I went to from kindergarten to 6<sup>th</sup> grade was also where I went to church. Parents were very involved in this system, more so many times than in the public schools, because the struggling Catholic schools often needed parents and parent volunteers to survive. One year my mom was the equivalent of the president of the PTA so I got to choose which movie our school would watch and had a good deal of input into field trips and other activities. The school was always trying to get parents and kids involved in fundraising. We were always having to sell something to help make ends meet, usually candy. Ultimately, these types of things really brought us together as a school community even though, like the children of the Reggio Emilia schools, we came from different municipal districts. Castle Shannon, Mt. Lebanon and Baldwin Township were all represented among the students at St. Winifred School. Ultimately, our school would close and I would go on to another larger Catholic school and another larger Catholic high school after that. Even though these schools were bigger, I think they shared one thing in common with the Reggio Emilia schools as well—all of the people who sent their children to these schools were really invested in their children’s education. They demonstrated this investment by helping to raise money to go to these schools and by helping to support them. In the cafeteria at both St. Winifred and St. Bernard, there

were a few full-time workers but most of the people who came to help serve lunch were other students' moms. So you got to know them and they were part of a larger goal—their child's education just as you and your mom were. A major difference between the Catholic schools here and the Reggio schools is that not everyone could go to the Catholic schools because you had to pay. There were price reductions available if you were Catholic and if you belonged to a specific Catholic parish but still, this is different in that it was not open to anyone as the Reggio Emilia schools are. In addition, the Catholic schools I attended were not committed to the idea of teacher as researcher as the Reggio schools are.

I think that what is needed in the United States is a real commitment to education reform, but this is only going to happen if people are willing to commit to it with their time and money. This is only going to happen if people are willing to share resources with those who have less money instead of hoarding the money and energy in rich districts and making it so that poor people cannot afford to move into them and are thereby, with a few notable exceptions of magnet schools and other special projects, cut off from a good education.

Right now, I am working on my initial licensure in AYA English, and I also work as a tutor to struggling students, mostly in math. One of the things I have seen through my work in schools is that teachers are expected to teach specific content. One of the things I wonder sometimes is: Is it really necessary for every single student to learn what the definition of irony is? Does everyone really need to know how to do geometry to graduate from high school? I feel like sometimes in the United States we may be limiting our students by forcing them to master everything and by mandating down to what degree

they will learn these things. You can mandate what you teach, but you cannot really force people to learn, nor necessarily, should you. What if some people are brilliant at physics and chemistry but terrible at English, but others are gifted short story writers who need to count on their fingers to add? Does everyone really need to be good at everything? One thing about the Reggio Emilia approach that I feel could be adapted to the United States is the use of project learning on a larger scale so that students can choose to learn and work on things that they are interested in. I think it also might help if students could do more individual and group work. One thing that Reggio Emilia does well is recognize that students have different strengths and capabilities and that students, by working together, can help each other and learn from each other. Too often in the United States, you still have the teacher standing up in front of the classroom lecturing and imparting knowledge as if it were *the truth*. It takes many American students too long to learn that they can question texts and question authority. For all the notoriety of so-called adolescent rebellion in America, I would argue that some Americans who have gone through our so-called wonderful education system never really learn how to question authority. Questioning authority in American schools still, too often, gets you detention or suspension. But in real life, sadly, not questioning authority often leads to following our political leaders blindly in the very way that Malaguzzi was reacting against. In our present society, this means that people often believe things because their religious or political leaders tell them it is true. It also means that we have soldiers dying in Iraq while many graduates of our American education system still call people traitors or unpatriotic or immoral if they question the decisions made by those in power to wage these questionable wars in the first place.

One thing I also think we need to do a better job of here in the United States is measuring the effectiveness of our schools. Here, we often have outsiders come in and measure the effectiveness of our schools and our teachers using instruments such as the Path wise assessments and standardized testing, but in Reggio, you have the teachers documenting the real, day to day learning processes? Should we be focusing on that, or is there a danger in focusing on processes to the detriment of product? How does one then measure if the students have retained what they learned two months ago about shadows or can you just know as many teachers do, just by looking at the children?

One thing that I think is common to all children everywhere is their desire to learn, at least when they are young. By the time some of them get to high school, however, something has happened to them. The desire to learn has been bled out of them in the same way that a marker bleeds from overuse and so by the time many of them get to 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade, if they make it there, what was once a bright red light yearning for knowledge has become a pale pink that is so faint, often you can no longer see it. Many American students, by the time they get to high school, seem to find the “book learning” they are getting to be useless. Just two days ago, a high school senior in a class for at risk students I was in, frustrated with his inability to come up with ideas for a compare and contrast paper, said, “I don’t care if I graduate or not.” By the time students get to high school, are the learning objectives so far removed from real life that many students fail to see the use of them? Or have we, as American educators, failed at communicating how and why and when these learning activities will be useful? One of the hopeful things I have seen in one of the classrooms that I am observing in and teaching in for my method’s class is the attempt that the teacher there is trying to make to connect

what students are doing with real-world activities. For example, as part of the English curriculum students will be working on college application essays. I wonder if students in America would still be more engaged and interested in school learning, as engaged and interested in things like boys and girls and parties and football games, if we gave the students more control over their own learning. At Reggio Emilia, students can choose which projects they want to work on, and not all students work on all projects. I think in American schools, we should offer students more choices for their learning. Instead of saying, all students have to write a paper on this subject, couldn't we give students a variety of options? For example, some students could write a paper on *Medea* while other could write about *Romeo and Juliet*, still others might choose not to write a paper for this topic but to do it on a later one. Some schools give students electives their senior year, but what if we gave students electives their freshman year? Does every student really need to know American Literature, or if so, could some students choose to read the *The Scarlett Letter* while other students read *Ethan Frome*? I think there are definitely more opportunities for US educators to give students some control over their educational destinies. I think this would tap into the innate enthusiasm that all children have for topics that excite them. With young children, there are so many opportunities for stimulating their interests because they really do want to know what makes the world go round and are constantly asking questions like "How?" and "Why?" but, it is not as if older children hate everything. Students in high school are usually interested in something; it just may not be algebra or Nathaniel Hawthorne. Or if we do still *have to* teach a certain work, there are a lot of ways we can make the work more interesting instead of just reading the

teacher notes out of the textbooks as many teachers, burnt out and frustrated or just lazy, tend to do.

Also, in the United States and countries around the world, there are educators asking themselves, “What can we do to better help students learn?” It is not as if the teachers of Reggio Emilia are the only ones asking themselves that question. However most of us do not have the means or opportunity to start from scratch as the Malaguzzi did in the 60s. Most of us are stuck with the same industrial looking classrooms where learning is expected to take place in neat rows. However, I have seen educators in the US who have modified this format. In one high school I visited last year, the teacher had taken out the desks, and instead she had put in round tables and sofas so the room had a coffee house feeling. Indeed, we may not have piazzas in US school (or even want them since the concept would make no sense to most Americans), but we could build more amiable learning environments here, working with the tools we have. However, there may be limits to what we can do. There may be industrial-minded principals and superintendents who would object to this, but there also might be others who would embrace it. What we need to do is start thinking about education differently in the US. That is not to say that we should just modify and adapt every aspect of Reggio schools to US schools. For one thing, many students, myself included, would be very uncomfortable receiving qualitative evaluations instead of grades. On the other hand, the cookie cutter solutions that we keep trying and retrying and repackaging and retrying here in the US seem in most cases to be yielding the same ineffectual results. I think it would be healthy, therefore, to use Reggio Emilia as a model, not necessarily in all its aspects, since we live in a very different culture. What we can use it as a model for is the kind of thinking the

Reggio Emilia educators engage in. They are willing to not only think outside the box but outside the Post Office for that matter. Another thing they do which we can and should be doing here is never resting on their laurels. You cannot keep doing the same thing you did 30 years ago and still expect it to work because society is not stagnant and neither should your educational practices be. Teachers at Reggio are always learning and listening and trying to find new insights for how they can better help today's children of Reggio Emilia learn because they realize that constant change and continual teacher learning can and should be a part of the educational process. That is a lesson that every educator, no matter what their culture or their current educational practices are, could benefit from. The other universal lesson of Reggio Emilia is: Don't be afraid to fail. We need to challenge children to reach their educational potential because, as Loris Malaguzzi correctly believed, the children are the future, and if they are the future; we should invest in them heavily with time, money and with our hearts as the educators of Reggio have. Schools should not be just a business to run, but rather, a labor of love and a constant ongoing challenge.

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