THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY:
Continuing the Dialogue

By Margie Cooper, Sammie Holloway and Patricia Simpson

Margie Cooper is the president and founder of Inspired Practices in Early Education, Inc. and a North American Reggio Emilia Alliance board member. Margie has participated in 14 study tours to Reggio Emilia. Sammie Holloway is a member of the Early Childhood Care and Education faculty at Atlanta Technical College, and has participated in two study tours to Reggio Emilia. Patricia Simpson is an adjunct instructor at Griffin Technical College and an independent early childhood technical assistant advisor and consultant, and has participated in one study tour to Reggio Emilia. Margie, Sammie and Patricia collaborate together in a professional development project called Project Infinity along with educators at four Atlanta area programs - Atlanta Technical College ECE Program, Cliff Valley School, Grant Park Cooperative Preschool and St. Anne's Day School - as well as First Baptist Kindergarten in Greenville, South Carolina. The following was inspired by the NAREA column in the Fall 2004 issue of Innovations titled, "The Challenge of Diversity: An Interview with Carol Brunson Day and Margie Carter."

I freed thousands of slaves.
I could have freed thousands more if they had known they were slaves.
-Harriet Tubman

Introduction

So much of what we have discovered from the study of the Reggio approach has revealed that the earliest catalysts for change in Reggio Emilia were born of a decision and a collective drive to question conventional thinking. The now well-known poem by Loris Malaguzzi, "The Hundred Languages of Children," has become a testimony to the obstacles we, as early childhood educators and advocates, seek to overcome - "the school and the culture . . . tell the child to discover the world already there and of the hundred, they steal ninety-nine." Although we seem united in
our hopes and dreams for children and our future, why is it that we continue to struggle with questions of culture, class, race and other headings, used to speak of our differences? Do we hold different images of children based on these determinations?

We thank Carol Brunson Day and Margie Carter for launching a discussion of these issues and offer in this response, not a response but a continuation of a discussion. But first, who are we? We are participants in a small, voluntary, experimental project based in Atlanta, Georgia. Ours is an ongoing struggle to examine strategies for raising the quality of programs for children in our community, using the study of the Reggio approach as a tool. January 2005 marked the beginning of our fourth year of work together. We are four schools in Atlanta and one in Greenville, South Carolina. We are mostly women. We are all educators. Some of us are white; some of us are black. Some of us are older; some of us are younger. Some of us are natives of Atlanta or Greenville; some of us were born in other cities, states or countries. In every typical categorization except occupation, some of us are this and some of us are that.

Alongside the educators of the five schools, there are others who play the role of cheerleader and supporter but work elsewhere— in the public schools, in universities, in the non-profit sector, in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The schools in our project are different from one another. One welcomes children from the wealthiest families in Atlanta. One welcomes children from the poorest families in Atlanta. One is a parent cooperative. One is connected to a technical school. One was founded just 4 years ago, while others have been in their communities for decades. Two of the schools participate marginally in our project, while three have used the project to deeply shape their actions, systems and styles of working. For each school, each system within the school, each classroom or each teacher, we could share both inspiring and demoralizing stories. Further, there is much that could be described about the differences between the schools. However, our guiding choice within our project work is to keep in front of us, that which unites us. That is, we care deeply about the children, families and educators in our community—no matter where they live or where they go to school. We are also united in our belief that we can do better in our efforts on behalf of children and families. And we want to challenge ourselves to work and learn together.

The gift that time has given our project is the opportunity to build strong professional relationships with one another. As relationships have grown, so has trust, which has enabled the group to face questions with honesty and truth that casual relationships seldom support. Looking back, several monthly meetings naturally evolved into forums for our own organic discussions of race, wealth, expectations and experiences. Like children, we are a naturally curious body of educators, who now often test our own perceptions against those of our trusted colleagues in the group. We have shared our insights with one another and, as we have shared, our insights have been enriched and sometimes changed because of the others.

As the three of us writing this article met one long afternoon to organize our thinking, we adopted the introductory quote as our challenge and our theme. What does it mean? We wonder together, are there patterns of thinking alive today that keep us from the fruits of our democracy? Do we unthinkingly embrace unexamined beliefs so naturally, that we have fooled ourselves about the forces holding us back from our potential? Finally, we ask, are all children born of potential or are some less endowed because they are members of a certain culture, a certain race or a certain family? And then, what about educators? Do educators of different backgrounds and cultures hold different views of children’s potential? How can we build together a community of educators whose differences are the strength of the group?

Somewhere along the way in our project, we began to wonder about and learn from one another, the possible different perspectives we held because of our race. Sometimes in our project, we have been richly rewarded by discussions that have naturally emerged about differing perspectives of parental expectations, family experiences, images of self and the culturally constructed image of the child by race. What have we experienced through this project regarding thinking about and living in diversity, as it relates to our work with children, families and each other? For purposes of this article, we will share three personal reflections.
Dimensions of Watching

by Sammie Holloway

On New Years Eve in Afro-American communities, one is very likely to discover large gatherings of people in churches throughout the United States. This celebration, known as "Watch Night," originated in the South during the enslavement of the Negro people. In the year 1862, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, legally freeing all slaves in the Confederate states. On December 31, 1862, hundreds of men, women and children gathered for the occasion known as "Freedom's Eve." They gathered in anticipation of the birth of the promise of personal sovereignty; they longed to taste the human right to be loved unashamed and to love; they marveled with shouts of joy for the right to have voice and choice in the negotiations of their daily affairs; they danced a jig, trumpeted their songs, cried great tears for days gone. On bended knees, they offered enthusiastic prayers of thanksgiving for the opportunity to know unbridled joy, and for the ensuing opportunities to be and to belong and to become.

The issues of enslavement have not been fully considered or reconciled within our present democracy by either the descendents of the enslaved or those that enslaved. The reality of our country in this present time is that it has never had a more diverse population, yet the scar of earlier mistakes still marks our efforts to build and act as citizens of one united nation. One hundred and forty one years since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, the discussion of full acceptance, the accessibility of justice, the range of rights for all people is yet relegated to intellectual exercises. In consideration of the issue of diversity, the daunting question is one of disequilibrium. Who are the authors of the current acts of diversity? Can diversity be administered?

Maybe diversity is a natural result of a surrender of incubated power, based on an innate consciousness of basic humanity. Maybe diversity results from the co-mingling of spirits and of souls, and the positive engendering of ideas rooted in the personal sovereignty of all of life's players. This has been my experience within our project, which has become known by us as Project Infinity - never ending. The idea of the project was to strengthen the evolution of the work of schools for young children through active and progressive collaborative work between culturally different school communities. The projected incubation of the project was four years. The human commitment was based on full participation, observations, integrity of thought and open-ended actions.

Experiences with Amelia Gambetti, from the Reggio Emilia schools, were connected to the project as a launching pad for the development of ideas and actions with regards to the examination of systems of cooperative relationships in the schools and between the schools. Each school director entered the project with a personal agenda, bias and values, deeply rooted in the culture of her origin. I believe that we were each seeking silently to be found or made better than the other, each hoping to make obvious our cultural preeminence. It was a predictable act of western manufactured diversity.

In the process, though, I experienced a personal awakening. Over time, I was captured by the game we were constructing together. I decided not to play by the old, familiar script any more. I decided that the stakes were too high. I decided to erupt from my personal posture of enslavement - the fear of being rejected for believing that I had the same opportunity to develop. I internalized the evolution of the work of the schools in Reggio Emilia. I digested Amelia's passions regarding struggle as a value rather than an obstacle, and Margie's unrelenting search to create approaches for the group to think and act in ways that challenged our values with respect to children and the learning community network. I realized that the scope of our work together was more than a
succession of gatherings but instead, presented a possibility for me to restructure my inner world through a series of actions, built together with others who were experiencing with me the devaluing of a corroded system of inflated woes.

The co-mingling of spirit and souls . . . the engendering of ideals, rooted in personal and collective sovereignty . . . the right and responsibility to love freely and to be loved . . . the right and responsibility to have voice and choice in negotiating our daily affairs . . . the right and responsibility to unbridled joy . . . the right and responsibility to anticipate, to feel . . . the right and responsibility to express, without fear of being discovered as strong and sent to the back, in order to maintain the establishment . . . were realized little by little at each gathering.

In one of our meetings, Amelia made reference to documentation as a tool for leaving traces of identity or giving value to a presence of a people and their work, and the connection of their work to subsequent actions. Thinking about her words, I began to question my personal choices of images in my home as well as in the school. I reflected about unthinkingly using only images of celebrated black heroes and unknown portraits in my home. I thought instead about the value and the ideology of including images that were reflective of my own personal experience as well. At school, I began to think of using images of the children, whose lives filled and had once filled the school. This seemed so simple, but why had I not thought about it before?

The value of mutual respect as a tool for advancing a common goal took root in me and, hopefully, in the souls of those to whom I am joined. If only for just a short time every month, the possibility to build together in an emotionally safe environment is a moment in time that conjures up, for me, the possibility of many subsequent "eves of freedom." Watch Night is relevant and remains so for all the same reasons experienced on December 31, 1862. Actualized diversity in our worlds of work and play places demands on everyone's interior being.

---

The Rights of All Children

*by Patricia Simpson*

How does one's cultural background fuel beliefs and thoughts regarding the rights of children? How does previous civic training prepare educational relationships? For many in the educational community, recent research and additional awareness of infants' and toddlers' growth and development has calmed the dialogue of nature vs. nurture. Studying the Reggio approach, however, has initiated other thoughts, discussions and hopes. Are all children born of power, competence and potential?

The first year of life and the incredible developmental strides made by most infants confirm their competence. Most of these feats are made without instructions from adults. The adult in the child's life, as well as the environment surrounding the child, certainly have a role in providing rich experiences. However, does the child receive the same respect and privilege that colleagues might receive for their accomplishments?

In many cultures, "a child is to be seen and not heard." Often children do not have the same privileges as other members of their community. Young children are not allowed to challenge adult thinking with questions or to speak out for themselves. Ronald Lally and colleagues at the WestEd Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers provide caregivers a simple formula for listening to the youngest child, as they make known their ideas, wishes or desires. If adults "watch, ask and adapt," the infant can be heard and understood. Infants expect the adults caring for them to respond respectfully and accordingly. Adults have a moral obligation to create environments that respect and encourage opportunities for infants to question and draw hypotheses from their daily experiences and relationships.

In some settings, I wonder whether infants and toddlers ask themselves, “How can they allow me to stay in such deplorable conditions? How does this space permit my voice and my families' voice to be heard?” Adults have an ethical responsibility to create living and learning environments for young children that are, at a basic level, clean, organized and inten-
Adults have an ethical responsibility to create living and learning environments for young children that are, at a basic level, clean, organized and intentionally designed to share and invite civic relationships among families, children, school and community. Environments are not determined by finances, but by values.

-Patricia Simpson

In his book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Parker Palmer examines civic models of community. He looks at the role and responsibility each member of the community has in the learning process. If the rights of children are understood (the head) and believed (the heart), and if we are convinced that infants are born competent and that adults must respect infants as a valuable part of the community, why is it not more evident in classroom practices (the hand)? Is quality child care only for the elite in our society? I think not!

As I travel around our state observing in child care centers and family child care homes, I am appalled at some of the environments. I encounter drab, unkempt and cluttered environments where cribs line the entire classroom more often than not. Conditions that would not cost more than time and muscle to clean are widespread. In a society where wealth is perceived by the amount of material goods one possesses, caregivers seek more "things" rather than effectively and efficiently using equipment and materials they may already have. Many caregivers do not or cannot see the value in balancing commercial materials with authentic found materials for children to explore.

Child care providers, families and children who take pride in their environments share decision-making and responsibility in creating and maintaining the environment. I wonder how often technical assistant advisors and funders encourage child care programs to take inventory before accumulating additional materials? Do child care providers start by stripping and cleaning the environment before replacing toys and equipment?

Answers to these questions reflect the practice in many early childhood and educational settings, as well as the preparation and training of early childhood teachers. The fundamental beliefs of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia hold high the principle of civility and the relationship among the child, the family and the school. After watching a video clip about the transformation of a school in Washington, D.C. embracing the Reggio approach, the promise of the rights of children echoed loud and clear.

As I watched the Model Early Learning Center video in the company of the colleagues participating in our project, I felt an incredible amount of pride. As the video began and I saw the uncluttered center with white, almost pristine walls and the ongoing studies of the area surrounding the nation's capital, I was in awe. The children and families in this learning community were predominately African-American. Their experience is such a contrast to what I frequently witness in research conducted with low-income African-American children. All too often, such research is designed not to show competence, but to highlight deficiencies.

Do all children have a right to the type of education inspired by the Reggio approach? I say yes! If more educators recognized children's competence, believed in it and built upon it, we could bring so many more programs to the high quality of care that all children deserve.
Reflections on Project Infinity

By Margie Cooper

In my experience with large groups of early childhood educators, I have found that it is quite rare to observe working connections between schools from the same communities. It seems to be very unusual for individual schools to see themselves as part of any system beyond their own, yet it is not uncommon for schools to send educators to sometimes distant professional development sessions to seek ideas, wisdom and experience from others. Once gathered, it is often true that participants begin to share similar struggles regarding their work.

If school-to-school connections within communities are rare, connections between schools and other segments of the community, such as business, political, academic, cultural or recreational organizations, are virtually non-existent. Schools, centers and programs for young children live mostly as islands within a sea of vibrant community life. Not true at all for the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Why is this? Though I have no certain answers to that question, I wonder to what extent beliefs in the wisdom of each person of a community contribute to their style of working. It seems that ours is more of a society that believes in the expert rather than in the wisdom of the common other.

Yet, in our experience within this project, the vitality and uniqueness of each person has been a kind of expertise or fuel for our work. From every person, we have learned something new, been questioned from a particular perspective, and given gifts of stories from the world of children, about which to think. Though each school stands at a particular intersection in our community, the dreams we share are united by our hopes for all children. Using each other to grow deeper in our knowledge, to gain different experiences and to share in the struggle has been good for our professional and personal development.

When words begin to take on new and/or deeper meanings, we feel progress. "Use diversity as a richness" is written in one of many notebooks dedicated to my own study of the Reggio approach. Hearing that concept discussed by Reggio educators and living the truth of it has felt entirely different to me. For years, it was much easier to fall into thinking that, of course, they are a different people who can do different things than we, in the United States. Easier to think that their way of life was given to them, rather than constructed intentionally and with tremendous effort by them. The fruits of this small project, in which I am one participant, have shown that using diversity as richness is a point of view, a decision and a choice. The more we choose it, the more it becomes a style of thinking and working.

As I reflect back across three years of efforts to come together in order to think together, I am struck by the usefulness of thinking. It has been and is the decided action that contributes most to our development. Our project, then, has been simply a choice to think with others. In the moments when we have been presented with a question or an idea or an analysis that engages our thoughts, diversity becomes our necessity. For it is then that we need each other’s point of view, style and insight to grow beyond.

-Margie Cooper
It is definitely true that we haven’t changed any part of the world beyond the circle of this project in the years we have been working together. Our group, like programs, centers and schools throughout North America, is marginalized from the sweeping education movements of national, state and local bureaucracies. However, we now live professional lives that are less lonely, less despairing and less arbitrary. We know we matter to each other, that we can rely on each other and that our work has taken on much deeper meaning and purpose. Figuring out the daily work of being an educator in action with children and families is our constant task. It is still incredibly challenging, but now the wisdom and experiences of each person and the group present us with infinite strategies, ideas and new desires.

We don’t have many answers, but we do feel that we are on to something as it relates to professional development within the context of whole schools. This format has given us many opportunities to examine situations, ways of doing school, values, assumptions and daily work. Further, the collaborations between the schools have been useful when we discover together the differences between the schools on these same points and can ponder together, “why?”

It would be wrong for us to conclude this discussion without saying we are still struggling in our project to grow as colleagues facing public issues. Amelia Gambetti has shared several times with us, “teaching is a public act.” Criticism and questioning, then, is not the same as if someone comes into your home, and analyzes choices and actions. Still, the learning curve for each of us to grow confidently as resources for each other, willing to offer to the other a difficult question, a criticism or an opposite point of view, is steep. The best we can say is that, in addition to our willingness to debate children’s rights and education, we also have placed ourselves in a space where questions of culture, class, race and a myriad of others can find a voice.


**Different:** partly or totally unlike in nature, form, or quality.

**Diversity:** (1) differing from one another. (2) having various forms or qualities

**REFERENCES**
