



North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

THE TUCSON CHILDREN'S PROJECT: AN ACTION ADVOCACY INITIATIVE

Tucson. Pronunciation: tuwsan/accent on the u. The Tohono O' dham's customarily named their villages after distinct landmarks, in this case, an old village at the base of a mountain. The Spanish pronunciation was an approximation of the Tohono O' dham's name, Tuqui Son or in the current form, Tucson. Tu-uk-son meaning "black base -spring at the foot of a black base/mountain."

By Teresa Acevedo, Pauline Baker and Mimi Gray

Teresa Acevedo is Director of Children's Services for Head Start Child-Parent Centers of Southeastern Arizona and a member of the NAREA Board. Pauline Baker is a Studio and Resource Teacher with Tucson Unified School District and a Head Start consultant. Mimi Gray is the Executive Director of Community Extension Programs, Inc., a non-profit community education program that provides a variety of programs for children and youth from 2 1/2 through 18 years.

The editors of Innovations and the NAREA Board would like to invite educators from Reggio network groups and collaboratives throughout North America to contribute articles about this form of professional development within their own communities, to be published in future NAREA Columns. Please send your approximately 1000-word articles to Judith Allen Kaminsky, j_a_kaminsky@wayne.edu

"It was the desire to bring people together and talk with other early childhood educators in the community that launched the Tucson Children's Project initiative." -Pauline Baker

The Tucson Children's Project (TCP) initiative began to take shape in 1995 through informal invitations to interested educators and community members to join together for conversations on one Saturday morning every month. For several years, the Southern Arizona

Early Childhood Network met, which created time and space for lively and provocative debates centering on early childhood education. The Network addressed early childhood issues and contemplated the effects of pending political decisions that might change the direction of education for the new millennium. The group discussed various ways to prepare for the inevitable educational shifts. What shape would early childhood take in the future and how would this impact teaching and environments?



Our location adjacent to the Mexican border, the lack of current political support for early childhood education, limited access to health care of the poor, and the over-arching issue of immigrant rights create a demand for action on behalf of children, families and teachers. The Tucson Children's Project works to give a face and voice to these struggles and the realities of daily life in the Southern Arizona educational arenas, where quality of life and quality of education are deeply entwined.

-Teresa Acevedo, Pauline Baker and Mimi Gray

Serendipitously, in 1999, Pauline learned that Lella Gandini wanted to visit the desert to spend time with her son. Lella accepted an invitation to visit Tucson in the spring of 2000. From this arose the possibility of creating a public event during which Lella would speak to educators and community advocates, and visit the preschool classrooms and studio at Van Buskirk Elementary School. This was the first Reggio-inspired program in Tucson, one in which the role of the studio, the studio teacher, materials, tools and processes became visible provocations to traditional thinking about learning and cognitive development. Carolyn Marsden, Ann Sanchez and Pauline Baker were especially honored that Lella would visit their classrooms to address this first effort to incorporate the philosophy and values of Reggio in their program. This visit has come to symbolize the seed sown that continues to influence the practices and views of learning in evolving and dynamic early childhood learning environments.

The Tucson Children's Project is unusual in its organization. It operates effectively with very little formality, with no "official" membership, no Board of Directors and no dues. It works because of the infrastructure of support that has loose yet firm ties to local organizations. It is an "action advocacy initiative" of the Southern Arizona Association for the Education of Young Children as all TCP participants are SAzAEEYC members. This affiliation allows for financial transactions, outreach to members, and support for seminars and professional development opportunities to educators.

The passion that we bring to our study, our planning and our events are the self-sustaining fuel that fires everything we do. Our deep commitment to our work as early childhood educators has found its focus in the Reggio approach. For all of us involved in this diverse organization, this driving force is inextricably woven into our educational practice. This is not an abstraction but a vital reality. We face a myriad of challenges, mandates, standards and policy directives. But we make time to come together, often over a meal, and we leave re-energized by the solidarity that we generate in our coming together. This sense of community and cooperation is imperative. When we return to

our individual work, we almost always have a Tucson Children's Project event in some stage of development - seminars, tours, conferences and materials.

Since its inception in 2000, the Tucson Children's Project has hosted numerous public events that have drawn people from around the state. Our keynote presenters have included Lella Gandini, Karen Haigh, Amelia Gambetti and Cathy Topal. Their visits, knowledge, stories and expertise have fed our spirits and inspired our continued efforts. They have also directly impacted how we teach, how we think about early childhood education, and how we work together with children, families and each other. The Tucson Children's Project has collaborators from many community organizations. The Tucson Jewish Community Center has served as a frequent venue for our events, hosted in partnership with Tucson Unified School District, Head Start Child-Parent Centers, United Way First Focus on Kids, Central Arizona College, Second Street School and Professor Iliana Reyes from the University of Arizona, Language Reading and Culture Department.

The March 2007 conference, "In The Spirit Of The Studio," brought 200 people from across the country to Tucson. This was our first invitation to colleagues beyond our borders. The success of the conference has given us an appreciation for the strength of our work together. At this writing, the "Collaboration Across Borders" Conference will take the Hopes & Dreams Project to New Mexico. In May 2008, the Tucson Children's Project will travel to Reggio Emilia with colleagues from California, New Mexico, St. Louis and Chicago.

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"We have learned to bend, but we will never bow to the unreasonable and damaging requirements currently imposed upon young children."

-Mimi Gray

In 2002, an invitation was extended to Teresa Acevedo to serve on the board of NAREA. In that capacity, Teresa provides a vital and formal link between southern Arizona and the initiatives of NAREA. One of those initiatives is to schedule yearly "Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach" workshops in a variety of communities. Terry has brought this charge home to Arizona and arranged a series of professional development opportunities in Tucson, Douglas and Nogales. (Douglas and Nogales are located on the border of the state of Sonora, Mexico.) Though these events were scheduled at Head Start centers, there was issued a written as well as open invitation to the general community of educators. Through these workshops, Tucson Children's Project and Terry's commitment to education and to community, the influence of the Reggio approach continues to be far-reaching in Arizona.

The Hopes & Dreams Project, based on the work of Pauline Baker and Paula McPheeter, is the most recent initiative of the Tucson Children's Project.

It is a collaborative effort that is focused on the connection between our hopes and dreams for children and how these shape our relationships and our different identities. This project reflects the universal desire for the well being of all children - the essence of all projects initiated by the Tucson Children's Project. And, as always, in all journeys of heart and mind, we do not go alone but with many and to them, we extend our *gracias hoy y siempre*: Marsie Habib, Carol Nicolet, Adriana Gomez, Leo Lundholm, Deb Daniel, Jill Rosenzweig, the representatives of Reggio Children and many, many others.

"You must forget to give up" -Amelia Gambetti

"In so many parts of my life, I remember those words - we simply do not give up - we are unrelenting - we keep going and are energized by the beauty of our choices. -Mimi Gray

2008 NAREA SUMMER CONFERENCE in Boulder, Colorado

June 28-July 2, 2008

in connection with the

Grand Opening of New North American Version

of

**"The Hundred Languages of Children"
Exhibit**

*For further information, log onto NAREA website in
2008: www.reggioalliance.org*

