Innovations

In Early Education:
The International Reggio Emilia Exchange

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Introduction

The Spring 2020 issue of Innovations is an invitation to celebrate Loris Malaguzzi’s life and his contributions to innovation in education. From an interview with Lella Gandini (2012), Malaguzzi’s words continue to inspire us to consider how “a new educational experience can emerge from the least expected circumstances” (p. 35).

In the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy, celebrations began in February 2020. These events are discussed in the first article from Reggio Children titled, “A Hundred Languages of Children, A Hundred Years of Loris Malaguzzi, and A Hundred Years of Gianni Rodari.”

In this issue, we pay particular attention to Malaguzzi’s continued influence and inspiration for teachers. Malaguzzi’s beginnings as a teacher contributed to his ability to be empathetic to the challenges and joys of being a teacher. Alongside teachers, he worked to develop a pedagogical approach that interwove practice and theory, deeply rooted in the daily lives of children, teachers, and families.

As such, in the second article by NAREA board member Barbara Acton, “Remembering Loris Malaguzzi: An Interview with Lella Gandini,” we learn about Malaguzzi’s special relationship with teachers. As Acton states, “with Malaguzzi’s support, teachers developed a spirit of humility and the capacity to be comfortable with uncertainty and the unknown.” Malaguzzi valued uncertainty and wonder as important aspects of teachers’ professional inspiration and growth.

Malaguzzi continues to provoke us to think deeper about the kinds of systems that are needed to support education. In the Voices: Conversations From North America and Beyond section, “Project Infinity: Forming Relationships with New Teachers” authors Margie Cooper, Candace Dupree, Patty Randall, and Susan Redmond, reflect on the 19 years of Project Infinity’s work, “generating an interconnecting group of unrelated schools to embark on a path of studying and interpreting the philosophies and experiences of Reggio Emilia and evolving in response—together.” The article focuses particularly on Project Infinity’s formation of a pedagogical coordinating team that supports new teachers encountering the Reggio Emilia Approach.

In “Early Explorations of the Reggio Emilia Approach in the United States,” Karen Haigh shares her experiences working with early
Mission Statement

The North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) is a network of educators, parents, and advocates seeking to elevate both the quality of life and the quality of schools and centers for young children.

We envision a world where all children and adults are honored and respected for their potential, capabilities, and humanity.

Our mission is to build a diverse community of advocates and educators to promote and defend the rights of children, families, and teachers of all cultures through a collaboration of colleagues inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

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In 2020, we celebrate the centenary year of the birth of Loris Malaguzzi, inspirer of the Reggio Emilia Approach. The whole city of Reggio Emilia wishes to embrace this anniversary as an opportunity for exchange on the themes of rights and potentials in children and adults, of learning, and of education’s strategic role, at the same time taking on responsibility for fueling innovation in the field of education and, therefore, the elaboration of a new humanism through permanent reflection and debate.

Sixty years ago, Reggio Emilia generated an important story: the story of its municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. Loris Malaguzzi had a central role in the story, which has grown and changed, touching many other realities in Italy and around the world. It was an innovative experience, translating today into a qualified and extensive network of municipal early childhood services, which even after the death of its inspirer has continued to generate innovation.
Every year, Reggio Emilia is visited by more than 5,000 educators, teachers, professors, and students wishing to gain deeper understanding of a philosophy which, through Reggio Children, is in dialogue with 146 countries and territories around the world.

To celebrate the centenary of Loris Malaguzzi’s birth, the city of Reggio Emilia will be holding meetings, performances, conferences, seminars, exhibitions, and cultural events throughout the whole of 2020, and this will also happen in other venues in Italy and all around the world. The calendar of events takes its name from the manifesto-poem of the Reggio Emilia Approach: *Invece il cento c’è* (No way. The hundred is there) a poem written by Loris Malaguzzi and voicing a central idea of this educational philosophy, the child who has a hundred languages.

The high point of the *invece il cento c’è* calendar began the week of Loris Malaguzzi’s birthday. Since 1995, his birthday, February 23, has been an occasion when municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools communicate finds from learning journeys in the closing phases, or present new projects. In 2020, the week presented an opportunity to develop a synthesis of the thinking and lifework of Loris Malaguzzi and his coworkers, and to formulate working hypotheses for a new launching of the Reggio Emilia Approach towards the future.

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Invece il cento c’è.

Reggio Emilia, 2020
Birth Centenary of Loris Malaguzzi
100LorisMalaguzzi.it

A central event of this birthday week was the international study conference “If the eye leaps over the wall. Researching new paradigms for education” that took place on February 20 in Reggio Emilia’s municipal Valli Theatre, and on February 21 in various venues around the city. The conference was organized by Reggio Emilia Municipality, Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – Istituzione of Reggio Emilia Municipality, Reggio Children, and Fondazione Reggio Children – Centro Loris Malaguzzi, with the patronage of Emilia-Romagna region.
The title of the conference goes back to the name of the first exhibition realized in Reggio Emilia in 1981, which was the communication on projects developed by Loris Malaguzzi and coworkers in public early childhood education, and which brought with it the excitement and ferment of research projects in different areas of knowledge. This systemic thinking encountered favorable social and political conditions and shaped an experience that has generated innovation on levels that are socio-political, pedagogical, architectural-environmental, and managerial-organizational.

Participants in the plenary session on Thursday, February 20, included Michele De Lucchi, Vera Gheno, Telmo Pievani, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and a video contribution from Howard Gardner, with closing remarks from Luca Vecchi, mayor of Reggio Emilia. Alternating with these speakers were audio and video excerpts featuring Loris Malaguzzi made public for the first time, and contributions from Reggio Emilia’s infant-toddler centers and preschools.

The program for Friday, February 21, featured a series of themed seminars in various venues, examining different areas – The right to have Rights, The right to Subjectivity, The right to Research, The right to Competency, The right to Beauty – which were followed by visits and dialogue in Reggio Emilia’s infant-toddler centers and preschools, in collaboration with the city’s integrated public system.

At 9 p.m. in the evening we returned to celebrations of an annual event in people’s homes, in schools, and in libraries with “The Night of Tales. Stories of Heaven and Earth” dedicated to Loris Malaguzzi and Gianni Rodari. Once again, Reggio Emilia sent an invitation to friends around the world to rediscover the magic and value of story.

During the weekend, several other events in Reggio Emilia marked the centenary of Loris Malaguzzi’s birth. On the morning of Saturday, February 22, in Palazzo Da Mosto, “Together for rights: A panel of national and international foundations on children’s rights” was organized by Fondazione Reggio Children – Centro Loris Malaguzzi and Fondazione Manodori.

During the same morning a selection of infant-toddler centers and preschools were open for visiting, in collaboration with the city’s public integrated system, and ateliers for adults were held at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center. In the afternoon, the Malaguzzi Center hosted inaugurations of the exhibition “Clay. Prelude to a manual” which is an anticipation of a manual on the language of clay to be published by Reggio Children in 2020, and of a revised digital version of the exhibition “Illustrators for Gianni Rodari” in collaboration with Bologna Children’s Book Fair.

At 6 p.m. in Piazza Martiri del 7 Luglio, there was a projection of the video “Imagine a forest...” which accompanies the exhibition of
drawings and theories on “Trees and Nature” by children in Reggio Emilia’s infant-toddler centers and preschools, diffused throughout shops in the historic center.

On Sunday, February 23, the Loris Malaguzzi International Center was open to children and families with a day of “Children at the Centre” – a kaleidoscope of opportunities, ateliers, explorations, stories, play, and fun.

Loris Malaguzzi’s story was woven with the story of writer Gianni Rodari (whose birth centenary is also in 2020) through the generative encounter between Malaguzzi’s theory of the “hundred languages of children” and Rodari’s theory of “Fantastica.”

Loris Malaguzzi’s story was woven with the story of writer Gianni Rodari (whose birth centenary is also in 2020) through the generative encounter between Malaguzzi’s theory of the “hundred languages of children” and Rodari’s theory of “Fantastica.” In 1972, Rodari held a week of educational meetings in Reggio Emilia’s schools, an experience that generated his important work The Grammar of Fantasy and which he dedicated to the city. This is the background to several events, as well as “The Night of Tales” and the “Illustrators for Gianni Rodari” exhibition. To commemorate this important writer in Reggio Emilia throughout 2020, “Telephone Tales,” a production by the Aida Foundation, was held in Reggio Emilia’s Ariosto Theatre on Sunday, February 23, at 4:30 p.m., and at 6 p.m. there was a musical reading dedicated to Malaguzzi and Rodari in the Valli Theatre called “A Fantastic Story, Children for 100 years. In Reggio Emilia,” produced by Fondazione I Teatri, Reggio Children, Associazione Teatrale Pistoiese.

We would like to thank everyone who shared together with us in these initial events of 2020. Other initiatives dedicated to Loris Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia Approach are currently taking place, thanks especially to new technologies that let us stay in contact even during these difficult times. We would therefore like to thank all those who are supporting, and will continue to support, Reggio Emilia’s infant-toddler centers and preschools through different events and initiatives. In the hope that we will be able to experience other special moments together and in person, in Reggio Emilia, and around the world, our wish for education and for all of us, is for serene and vital, living prospects of future.

Credits

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More Information

Please visit: www.10olorismalaguzzi.it
Remembering Loris Malaguzzi: An Interview with Lella Gandini
by Barbara Acton, Karyn Callaghan, and Jeanne Goldhaber

Barbara Acton is currently director of Radcliffe Child Care Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Formerly, Barbara served as assistant director of Early Childhood Education for Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities (FCBDD), executive director of the Childhood League Center, and director of the Program for Young Children at Columbus School for Girls, all in Columbus, Ohio. She was first introduced to the Reggio Emilia philosophy in 1993 when the exhibit, “The Hundred Languages of Children” was in Columbus. She is a founding member of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) and currently serves as co-chair on its Board of Directors. Barbara is an ardent advocate for all children dedicated to establishing inclusive, rich early childhood education opportunities accessible to all families. She holds a BA in Elementary and Special Education and a MA in Policy and Leadership, Educational Administration.

Karyn Callaghan is an Innovations consulting editor, a NAREA board member, co-representative of NAREA in the Reggio Children International Network, and president of the Ontario Reggio Association. Karyn has been a keynote speaker at conferences across North America, and in Asia and Australia. A book entitled “Documenting Children’s Meaning: Engaging in Design and Creativity with Children and Families”, co-authored by Karyn, Carol Anne Wien, and artist Jason Avery has been published by Davis Publications.

Jeanne Goldhaber is an Innovations consulting editor and a NAREA board member. Jeanne, an associate professor emerita, taught in the early childhood program at the University of Vermont in Burlington, VT for over 25 years. She is a current member of the Reggio Inspired Vermont Early education Team (RIVET) 2.0.

Setting the Context

To commemorate the year of Loris Malaguzzi’s 100th birthday, NAREA board members were asked to contribute articles, related to Malaguzzi’s life and work, to Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange 2020 issues. Toward that end, we (Barbara Acton, Karyn Callaghan, and Jeanne Goldhaber) asked Lella Gandini, United States liaison for the dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach, to let us interview her about the role she played for so many years as Malaguzzi’s primary interpreter and valued colleague, and about the contributions she has made, and continues to make, to the North American early childhood community. We were delighted when Lella graciously agreed.

We organized ourselves so that Barbara drove to Lella’s home in western Massachu- setts while Karyn and Jeanne participated in the interview thru a Zoom meeting call. We interviewed Lella on two separate occasions. George Forman, who co-edited The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation with Lella and Carolyn Edwards, joined us for the second
With the grace, intelligence, and generosity that is synonymous with her name, her life, and her work, Lella began her recollections with stories of relationships that were characteristic of Malaguzzi, the man, scholar, and friend. His relationships were diverse and complex and included leaders in psychology, education, and philosophy from all over the world: Howard Gardner, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and David Hawkins to name a few. He held these individuals in high esteem and was eager to learn from them. Lella recalled that after Jerome Bruner visited Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia, Italy, Malaguzzi asked her to visit Bruner in his home in the United States so that she could follow up on some of the ideas the two of them discussed during their meeting. Armed with Malaguzzi’s questions, Lella spent a week with the Bruners in their home and returned to Italy to share with Malaguzzi what she had learned – such was the trust and respect Malaguzzi had for Lella, both as his interpreter, and also as his ambassador with scholars of North America.

In celebration of his centennial birthday we gathered together to learn about him from Lella’s years of experience serving not only as Malaguzzi’s interpreter when he spoke publicly, but also as his co-researcher and colleague as he was sought by and in equal part, sought to learn from scholars all over the world.

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Tell Us Your Stories, Lella
by Barbara Acton

Aided by modern technology, NAREA board members Karyn Callaghan, Jeanne Goldhaber, and I met with Lella Gandini on two separate Saturday mornings in her Northampton, Massachusetts home to talk about and remember the life and work of Loris Malaguzzi – philosopher, educator, researcher, poet, and founder of the world-renowned schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Malaguzzi was born on February 23, 1920 – 100 years ago! In celebration of his centennial birthday we gathered together to learn about him from Lella’s years of experience serving not only as Malaguzzi’s interpreter when he spoke publicly, but also as his co-researcher and colleague as he was sought by and in equal part, sought to learn from scholars all over the world.
Equally precious, explained Lella, were his relationships with the teachers with whom he worked every day, teachers like Vea Vecchi who had gone to the University of Modena and who was a gifted educator and scholar in her own right. Lella shared stories of mornings she spent in the Diana School when, playing the role of Malaguzzi’s eyes and ears, she would observe Vea’s atelier and then meet with Malaguzzi to share her observations. Noticing our quizzical looks, she told us that the children were distracted by Malaguzzi’s presence in the atelier, explaining, “His presence was too noticeable – sort of Magic!” At the end of the morning, Vea would join them and together they would try to reconstruct the morning’s experiences, “in order to gain more insight into the children’s desires and impressions.”

Lella also shared her memories of Malaguzzi’s ability to nurture teachers who, perhaps due to life experiences, did not recognize their own competence and potential. With Malaguzzi’s support, teachers developed a spirit of humility and the capacity to be comfortable with uncertainty and the unknown.

Lella’s stories revealed a man of great integrity, sensitivity, creativity, and passion. He had an insatiable desire to learn, to be in dialogue, always asking “why,” not in a challenging way, but always sincerely seeking to understand and connect. He wanted to understand the choices teachers made; he was intensely curious about children and teachers’ thinking.

Both Lella and George noted that Malaguzzi knew how to be patient. He had a way of asking questions and listening, communicating in every possible language his respect and his ardent unwavering commitment to advancing a different way of thinking about education, teaching, and learning.

As we read through pages of notes and considered what would be of the greatest value in recollecting Malaguzzi’s life and work, we remembered in Lella’s eyes an earnest desire that Malaguzzi might be truly known. We were reminded of the miraculous story of the young Loris Malaguzzi who bicycled from the nearby mountains following the conclusion of World War II to see if in fact what he had heard was true, that there were citizens, men and women, scraping bricks from rubble to build a school.
With that image, our thoughts became clear. As we recall Malaguzzi’s birth 100 years ago, let us remember that born in 1920, he would have been in his early twenties when the world was at war and all of Europe in the clutches of evil and death. Many of the preschools and infant-toddler centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy, bear the names of lives lost, and commemorate the liberation of a country – a people that were at risk of annihilation. Malaguzzi knew, and I think we must all remember, that knowledge and education at its very core is about knowing and being known, about life and yes, perhaps even about death. It is not with sentimentality that we recall his life and contributions to scholarship, education, and childhood, it is with a sense of urgency. Compelled by his convictions, Malaguzzi wrote:

All of us who work in education have learned ‘on the job’ that many things can be coloured by one’s cultural heritage, many by theories and experience, many by literature, art, economics, by scientific research and many things are born from intuition, taste, ethics, the choice of values, reasons and opportunities that in part we control and in part we do not and that are suggested only to a certain extent by the job of living.

Yet even in this constellation teetering between theory and practices that are stable and unstable, necessary, possible and even chance happenings, between the variations, imbalance and even adversities of social policies, there is space and freedom to use our intelligence, passion and creativity.

Despite everything, it is licit that creativity that is, knowledge and the wonder of knowledge (man’s most important right and one that often goes unrecognized) can serve as the strong point of our work. And it is our hope that it will become the regular traveling companion in the development of our children (1996, p. 19).

As we remember Loris Malaguzzi and think about our daily work with children, teachers, and parents, all of whom have been shaped by their cultural heritage and experiences, we must re-commit (again and again) to listening with all our senses, to making children’s thinking visible, and to the “wonder of learning” that ensures that children, all children, are known, respected, and treasured. Each is rich with humanity, empathy, and intelligence. Malaguzzi knew that education is

Malaguzzi knew that education is among the most precious rights of all children, a common good – but not just any education – it has to be an education based on relationships, an education that at its very essence gives value to every child’s right to be respected and valued as a unique individual.

REFERENCE


Margie Cooper is the standing chair of the NAREA board, co-representative of NAREA within the Reggio Children International Network, and a member of the board of directors of the Fondazione Reggio Children – Centro Loris Malaguzzi. Margie is also the founder and CEO of Inspired Practices in Early Education in Roswell, GA, and director of Project Infinity.

Candace Dupree is a Georgia native, parent, and educator. She serves Project Infinity as a pedagogista and Grant Park Cooperative Preschool as executive director. She has been learning and practicing in the field of early childhood education for 17 years. The last 12 years have been deeply inspired by the educational project in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Patty Randall is NAREA professional development and social media coordinator and director of educational practices at Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool in Atlanta, GA.

Susan Redmond has worked with children and families as a classroom educator, and currently in a pedagogical role, for 35 years at First Baptist Day School in Greenville, South Carolina. She actively participates in the mission of Project Infinity and is a member of the NAREA board.

WHAT IS PROJECT INFINITY?

Project Infinity is a collaborative, longitudinal, action research project involving schools for young children in Atlanta, Georgia, and Greenville, South Carolina. First known as the School Development Project, our work began following the presence of The Hundred Languages of Children exhibit in 2000 during the annual conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children in Atlanta. Project Infinity, a name coined by the founding group of schools in the School Development Project, is meant to suggest a style of work that builds forever on itself.

Participating schools make three main commitments:

1. A genuine, school-wide interest analyzing the experiences and philosophies of Reggio Emilia,
2. An active commitment to the wellbeing of all schools within the project, and
3. An active commitment to the wellbeing of schools in the wider community.

Currently, five schools participate in Project Infinity. First Baptist Day School in Greenville, South Carolina (a school that joins the former First Baptist Church Kindergarten and First Baptist Church Infant-Toddler Program), and four schools in Atlanta, Georgia: Grant Park Cooperative Preschool (a school that joins the former Cabbagetown Campus with the Grant Park Campus), St. Anne’s Day School, Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool, and The Nest Nursery School. Through these schools, Project Infinity engages annually with approximately 250 educators who work with more than 1,000 children and their families. Underpinnings of the project include a deep resistance to competition and a strong desire to continually elevate knowledge among all children and adults. We are driven to value the day-to-day life inside schools as our source of learning and desire to move away from the paradigm of a single expert. Rather, we see the possibilities that multiple perspectives of experience and points of view offer. Intertwined schools and educators are stronger together. Our choice has been to work as sister schools.
Anyone who undertakes a project or task thinks about actions that transform existing situations into new, desired ones. In our approach we proceed by making plans, considering options, making cognitive reflections and symbolic representations, and refining communication skills. Active exploration and creative production by educators and children proceed without complete certainty but with a shared representation of the point of destination the ultimate goal. What is most appreciated all along is the shared sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as individuals and as a group (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 9).

Project Infinity Background
by Margie Cooper

In the 19 years since Project Infinity began, a style of being in pedagogical relationship has been developing as we strive for authentic collaboration and participation among self-proclaimed “sister schools.” Inspired by the collective synergy of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, we are creating our own system of interactions and relationships to bring about the richness and diversity of group perspective and group responsibility for our ongoing investments in children, families, educators, and communities. From our beginning, strong curiosity about Reggio Emilia’s system of early childhood services lent us the notion that resisting the metaphor of schools as islands was important. Malaguzzi (1993) suggested, “[t]he strength of our system lies in the ways we make explicit and then intensify the necessary conditions for relations and interaction” (p. 62).

We continue to observe that one of the least explored aspects of Reggio Emilia’s six-decade-experience is the necessary and significant interrelationship between all infant-toddler centers and preschools of that city. They do not exist as a mere collection of side-by-side services, nor do they exist in a way that one school serves as a model for the others. Rather, as Rinaldi (2006) intimates, “[w]e realise not only that the other becomes indispensable for our identity, for our understanding, for communication and listening, but also that learning together generates pleasure in the group, that the group becomes the place of learning” (p. 117). While Rinaldi was discussing children in this passage, we take it also as a clue for the ways in which the educators, families, and citizens also interpret the significance of adult groups. Thus, our beginning as a project held paramount the idea of generating an interconnecting group of unrelated schools to embark on a path of studying and interpreting the philosophies and experiences of Reggio Emilia and evolving in response—together.

Written at the start of Project Infinity, a concept paper entitled, “School Development Project,” Cooper (2001) states:

This new initiative seeks to bring together four schools for young children with the volunteers of Inspired Practices for an ongoing course of professional development using the experiences of the infant/toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, as a reference point. Teachers, administrators, parents, and volunteers will embark on a journey of reflecting on current practices and developing ideas for change within the contexts of the participating schools. By developing a “community of learners,” new ideas and practices will be developed utilizing the wisdom and support of all participants (p. 1).

Currently, we are a working collaborative of five schools in Atlanta, GA, and Greenville, SC. Not long ago, we numbered seven schools until two mergers occurred. The mergers did not reduce the scope of the project or change...
the participants. Instead, it coupled two schools into one—in two separate instances. We remain approximately 250 educators, 800 families, and 1,000 children (infants to six-years-old) annually. All five schools are organized as not-for-profits managed by boards of directors.

We are often asked if these schools are public, which reveals the dearth of understanding in our community about the current mechanics of early childhood services. There is no comprehensive, public provision of birth-five early childhood services in any of our 50 states. As not-for-profit schools of childhood, there are no private owners or commercial franchises within the structure of any Project Infinity school, or within the overall project itself. There is no public funding or use of public buildings in the project schools. All but one school is housed in a church with arrangements ranging from church as landlord to church as benefactor to church as originator of an integrated church/school mission serving children and families. Project schools raise all funds for materials, food, overhead, salaries, and benefits through tuition and fundraisers—not unlike many, many infant-toddler centers and preschools in the United States. There are boards of directors and administrative teams in place at each school with collective responsibility for the mission, management, operation, and fiscal solvency of respective schools. Our project has maintained a decision to exclusively include not-for-profit schools due to the nature of group responsibility and participation already at the basis of such schools’ organizational structure. In seeking to grow from the example of Reggio Emilia, a deeply interwoven and highly participatory community whose system of infant-toddler centers and preschools is public and therefore an extension of that community’s view of early education services as a value, finding underpinnings that support a collective mindset has been our choice in the void of full-scale, public early childhood education in the two states where the project resides.

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mittee, there is now a pedagogical group and an atelierista group. From within these three groups, various subgroups have formed such as the new teacher experience working group, the whole project professional development working group, the identity research group, and others that come and go in connection to particular experiences such as hosting “The Wonder of Learning” exhibit, the “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” exhibit, or organizing project experiences in the school years before and after study weeks in Reggio Emilia. The steering committee strives to ensure balance between study, reflection, and action as they consider the diversity and strength of the whole group of schools in order to meet the challenges and possibilities at hand. This article shares the evolution of one working group within the project, the new teacher experience working group, to illustrate our ways of working and developing over time.


In 2006, five years after Project Infinity began, a special convening for new teachers was imagined when one school director observed, upon listening to the updates being shared during a summer retreat of the project schools’ directors, that each school was engaged in separate experiences with new teachers. She wondered if it would be possible for schools to plan a collaborative experience for all new teachers from all project schools. It was a time in our Southeast region when relatively little was known by educators about Reggio Emilia, Italy, or its decades-long evolution of municipal early childhood services. Most new educators at that time did not understand what it could mean to work in a Reggio-inspired school, much less a group of Reggio-inspired schools.

There was an immediate positive reaction to her suggestion and time was taken in the following months to organize our thinking and actions so that such an idea could be realized. Directors collectively determined to hold one day-long experience in the fall and spring of the following school year. The purpose was, “to assemble all new teachers entering any of the schools into a shared experience that could also support their introduction to values and discussion of the philosophies and experiences of Reggio Emilia” (Cooper, 2006, p. 10).

Directors voiced that if schools planned a new teacher experience together, perhaps the ways of welcoming new teachers into schools and into the project could become richer and relationships between educators and schools could become strengthened.

Directors voiced that if schools planned a new teacher experience together, perhaps the ways of welcoming new teachers into schools and into the project could become richer and relationships between educators and schools could become strengthened. Even though the project was five years old, relationships among educators between schools were still quite tentative and reserved. This was likely a result of weak organization in the project in terms of knowing a purpose for bringing educators together as well as the reality that time is necessary for relationships to build. Five years and a handful of poorly defined meetings between schools had not yet enamored educators from different schools with one another.

While this moment of finding an additional way for schools to work together in the early years of the project was a positive evolution in collaboration between schools, our collective development then was more attached to teaching new teachers about Reggio Emilia’s philosophies and values, Project Infinity’s history and vision, and each school’s unique identity, than to creating a dialogue among new teachers or among new and seasoned teachers.
We left little time for conversation, group discussion, or getting to know one another. It is as if we thought that simply putting new teachers from the different schools in the same room and sharing perspectives that excited us as a group of directors would magically bond the new teachers. But, as we gradually observed, it did not. What it did do was give us tangible experiences to analyze and reflect upon, which we did. These director reflections—sometimes superficial, sometimes in the sweet spot of insight—gave us the chance to evolve.

Looking back, our first muddled efforts to craft time and space for new teachers was a watershed for deepening project collaboration and launched not only new teacher experiences, but within two years, laid the foundation for other crucial, collaborative designs within the project including the formation of the steering committee, all schools’ educator exchange days, an internal project newsletter with contributions from an evolving variety of project educators, and whole group professional development days that closed all the schools two times per year so that whole project convening could be made possible.

The cross-school work in the first five years of the project had been heavily invested in the directors of the schools. It could be important to remember that at that time, directors were also pedagogistas because the general culture in American schools of childhood, with few exceptions, did not include either the profile of pedagogista or atelierista. As the directors endeavored to stretch toward one another through the design of the new teacher experiences, we realized how much more we could or should be doing to strengthen a systemic relationship between the schools.
2007-2008: Leadership Change Leads to Formation of Pedagogical Groups

In fall 2007, serendipity gave us a contribution when the project crossed its first transition of a director retiring and a new director entering the role. As it happened, after conducting a national search, the search committee of that school hired a new director who was a long-time teacher of the school. When she came into the new role of school director, she was vocal and determined to interpret her role from a collective, rather than individual lens. She expressed her desire to not be isolated in her role or to be expected to have all the answers. Almost immediately, she and a longtime administrator of the school decided to work as co-directors—one focusing more on pedagogy and one focusing more on administration. Further, many discussions internally at the school and with the project’s director led to the idea of forming a “pedagogical group” within the school so as to have a legitimate body to share in the school’s pedagogical vision and design.

At that time, the project’s director was onsite in each of the project schools at least one day per month, per school, attending internal meetings or conversing with school leaders or engaging in exchanges with small groups of classroom teachers about principles and values, ongoing work with the children and families, environments, and/or possibilities.

The formation of the pedagogical group in the first school, brought about organically through the transition to a new director, became a strategic idea to share with other schools in the project. What if each school assembled a willing team of educators to be the caretakers of the pedagogical well-being of the school? Would this be a contribution to relationship-building and more collegial ways of working within all the schools? Would it give schools something in common to discuss with one another from the point of view of various educators? Would directors be comfortable with a team approach to pedagogical decision-making? Other project schools decided to try what became our first example of pollination between schools.

As the previous example illustrates, one aspect of work as a school or as a project never happens in isolation from other realities that present themselves. The project and schools were just initiating new teacher experiences when a significant shift in the small group of school directors occurred. At that early time in the project, just three schools were participating and one of them was changing directors. We were well aware of the possibility that the church search committee could select a new director without interest in the Reggio Emilia Approach as its inspiration in the Southern region of the United States was far from widespread. Instead, the search committee was quite vocal in their support of the school’s transformative efforts and
selected a new director with strong experience in the school and Project Infinity. The change of directors ended up contributing to a shift within that school, but also within the project, to actively experiment with group pedagogical leadership.

The pedagogical coordinating team of *Istituzione* was then and is now a point of curiosity for our project. While we understand we cannot simply copy their way of working within the municipal system of infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, we can invent for ourselves strategies that are steeped in similar values.

The pedagogical coordinating team of *Istituzione* was then and is now a point of curiosity for our project. While we understand we cannot simply copy their way of working within the municipal system of infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, we can invent for ourselves strategies that are steeped in similar values. Facing change with a gaze toward possibilities has often turned out to be important for moments of growth within our work. Despite the heightened activity of forming and designing experiences for the in-school pedagogical groups, new teacher experiences continued.

**2008–2010: A Gentle Burst of New Actions**

After the first two years engaged with biannual new teacher experiences and the groups of new teachers themselves, a collective idea emerged to reduce the amount of time between experiences so that new teachers from all the project schools had an even better chance of getting to know one another early on. So, the timing of new teacher experiences shifted to holding both in the fall. The organizational responsibility for content remained with the project director in collaboration with school directors. Schools were in early experiments with newly formed pedagogical groups, and schools in the wider, local community were increasingly requesting visits to schools in the project as word traveled about the schools’ early transformations within Reggio Emilia inspiration.

During project directors’ meetings, our collective awareness about growing interest in project schools by the wider community gave over to an idea to offer what came to be known as “educator exchange days.” The idea was to create an annual calendar of dates, two per school, to share with the community. By planning together, many dates became available in a single school year. If a visitor was unable to attend the dates of one school, there were other dates at other project schools that might work for the visitor. A format for the content of the exchanges was collectively developed. Educator exchange days became another avenue, like the new teacher experiences, to create professional development that foremost strengthened our own development within the project as we invested in our articulation, visibility of values, and children/adult learning processes. The schools were wise to stipulate that any educator at any project school was always welcome to attend any educator exchange. Twelve years hence, many project educators, including new teachers, continue to enjoy visiting one or more of their sister schools on exchange days.
beginning and had a strong desire to remain as participants. The second school was a large preschool with a years-long request to join the project. The scale of the project doubled with the inclusion of these two additional schools. This change in scale invited us to begin rethinking again how we were living and working as a collegial organism.

The increased organization and design of educator exchange days also led the directors’ group to organically evolve into the project steering committee, a collection of small working groups from each school of which most were participants at that time in their own school’s pedagogical group. To welcome visitors in a more formal approach meant we needed groups of us to take on various new responsibilities. From that beginning, the scale of the steering committee remains stable today with 20 to 25 people from all schools. The formation of both educator exchange days and the steering committee have been tremendous generators of growth and remain key structures that lend project resources to continuing evolution within new teacher experiences.

There was a gradual shift from teaching to learning as steering committee participants grew more capable of meeting new teachers with a growing spirit of equanimity. This shift was possible largely due to the presence

2011-2012: Evolving Through Expansion

One of the most significant changes in the structure and personality of the project occurred in 2011 when two additional schools were added as participating members of the project. One school was brand new, founded by two teachers from one of the project schools. As such, these two teachers and their partner, a founding parent of that same project school, had been participating in the project since its

The project grew from approximately 100 teachers to over 200 teachers from one year to the next; the annual scale of new teachers also doubled. While we relied on our previous experiences welcoming new teachers, it was soon clear the time to rethink our approach to all aspects of the project was important. New teacher experiences eventually grew from two per year to three per year, preparation of the organization of new teacher experiences was increasingly shared by more members of the steering committee, and we began including previous classes of new teachers to remain as participants.

There was a gradual shift from teaching to learning as steering committee participants grew more capable of meeting new teachers with a growing spirit of equanimity.
of time and structure within steering committee meetings for participant leaders to reflect, discuss, and debate different perceptions being shared by new teachers inside their home schools. It is also worth noting that ongoing whole project group study—anchored by two whole project professional development days, shared readings and discussions, periodic project study weeks in Reggio Emilia, periodic international and national guest educators such as Amelia Gambetti, retired educator from Reggio Emilia; Mary Hartzel, then director of First Presbyterian Nursery School in Santa Monica; Judy Abrams, then director of the Cyert Center in Pittsburgh; or local guests such as a journalist for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution newspaper; the founder of an engagement program for homeless teens; dancers; yoga professionals; puppeteers; architects; craftsmen; and the huge volume of daily life with children, parents, and colleagues—also contributed to our collective capacity to observe, listen, document, relate, and reflect with greater depth.

2015-2016: New Teacher Institute Launches

A collective decision to further expand the new teacher experiences emerged from ongoing discussions within steering committee. In addition to the existing three day-long gatherings for new teachers, the project added a three-day “new teacher institute” in the month of August. The idea of the institute was seen as a possibility for strengthening the planning weeks prior to the start of school by bringing project work into that period within the schools. Up to this time, schools felt the need to keep the planning weeks dedicated to individual school preparation. However, the schools were eager to try something new and saw the institute idea as an additional richness, rather than a taking away of time before the new school year began. Focusing on experiences new teachers could have together that would give an indication of who they were, what they were thinking, and what they might be questioning pedagogically—combined with the opportunity for different subgroups within the project to take responsibility for the content and organization of the institute—was the framework for the first institute.

The title of the first institute, “The First Thirty Days,” became the professional development thread for all the new teacher experiences organized that school year. Experiences included setting up classroom environments in small groups and discussing the values of the environment as the third teacher within Reggio Emilia’s perspective. Other elements included small group discussions about the first 30 days, participatory ateliers, role-playing conversations, and viewing the video, “Everyday Utopias,” a magnificent resource for seeing and hearing an ordinary day in the life of an infant-toddler center and a preschool in Reggio Emilia.

The content for the three-day institute was rooted in the summer-long preparation of a presentation by two educators within the project, one co-director/pedagogista and one teacher of infants. It was the first time that such a detailed and intricate presentation had been organized by us, rather than a visiting educator. Additionally, each of the schools shared ministries from their archives in which the concept of inserimento could be re-considered and re-interpreted within experiences ongoing in the schools. By beginning together through the institute, rather than as separate schools
in pre-planning days, a stronger connection among new teachers and steering committee members carried throughout the school year. A sense of collegiality blossomed among new teachers. Collective enthusiasm and a sense of belonging contributed to stronger encounters and conversations that continued throughout the school year.

2016-2017: Second New Teacher Institute

During steering committee reflections of past new teacher experiences, a continuous desire to strengthen these opportunities created a space of creative energy to resist repeating previous approaches or topics. This choice enabled the learning of not only new teachers, but those within the steering committee who faced together the task of organizing material for these new teacher experiences. A determination was made to keep the new teacher experiences tethered to a project-wide focus and to increase the amount of time new teachers were together with pedagogistas and steering committee members.

The topic selected for the second institute was *inserimento* (Gandini & Edwards, 2001, p. 10). It was felt there was a connection to the previous year’s topic, and that this thread would give us an opportunity to form strategies for sharing the project’s previous research of *inserimento*, which had been ongoing for many years as schools came into the challenges of modifying environments and experiences reflective of the new paradigm Reggio Emilia inspiration represented. For us, *inserimento* is not simply welcoming, but a permanent process of relationship-building and questioning why we do what we do so as to resist as much as possible becoming unaware, complacent, or routine. Bove (2001) describes *inserimento* as “a never-ending process of growth, transformation, and getting to know each other” (p.121). Thus, assumptions about time, relationships, experiences, materials, complexity, community, ongoing dialogue, and solidarity are permanently subject to our collective interrogation and study. The way we “do school” evolves over time because of changed perspectives, insights, and new desires.
2017-2018: Third New Teacher Institute

The following year continued with the same structure: a three-day institute in August, and three additional new teacher experiences spread throughout the school year. The steering committee members continued their responsibilities as organizers of the new teacher experiences. Designated steering committee members took on responsibilities for designing and organizing parts of the whole, while most all steering committee members were present to welcome and interact with new teachers.

The organization of the new teacher experiences, including the annual institute, does not happen in isolation from myriad other threads ongoing within in the project. For example, this third new teacher institute was strongly influenced by the steering committee’s three years of reading and discussing chapters from Carla Rinaldi’s *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia*. At this juncture, we were deeply immersed in reflecting on “the image of the child” as discussed by Rinaldi (2006, p. 122). One of the

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**Our Image of the Child**

*Image of the Child* poster for all project classrooms 2017-2018

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A child who has his own values and is adept at building relationships of solidarity. A child who is always open to that which is new and different. A possessor and builder of futures, not only because children are the future, but because they constantly re-interpret reality and continuously give it new meanings.

The child as a possessor and constructor of rights, who demands to be respected and valued for his own identity, uniqueness and difference. To think of a child as a possessor of rights means not only recognizing the rights that the society gives to children, but also creating a context of ‘listening’ in the fullest sense. This means that we must recognize and accept the uniqueness and

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Recent biological and neuroscientific research also lend insight...

- The human brain is extremely plastic.
- In the first seven to eight years of life, there is a surplus of neurons that allows practically infinite possibilities for development.
- Genetic information is not sufficient for establishing the connections between these billions of neurons, so that many connections take place in the interaction with the external environment.

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Carla Rinaldi, pp. 123-126, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: listening, researching, and learning*
recurring questions to ourselves was, “Do we truly carry a high image of the child?” This question then naturally extends to, “Does our school truly carry a high image of the child?” After so many years of living and working together as a project of Reggio-inspired schools, we felt it was critical to re-interrogate ourselves on this fundamental ideal. We were also noticing that new teachers as a group were far different than the first groups of new teachers a decade earlier. Now, all new teachers came into the schools with some knowledge of the Reggio Emilia Approach, perhaps having encountered it in teacher preparation courses or because increasing numbers of schools throughout North America self-identify as Reggio-inspired. New teachers were increasingly eager to participate in conversations, perhaps because this is a characteristic of a new generation, or perhaps because we in the project are more capable of facilitating conversations with an openness for multiple perspectives.

We were interested in the image of children and childhood that new teachers held. During the institute, we shared classroom mini-stories and YouTube videos that provided opportunities to collaboratively discuss our observations of young children. We noted how much the new teachers shared a view of children as capable, communicative, relational, and intelligent. This had not been the case ten years earlier. We don’t really know why, but we like to think the culture in our communities regarding children and education is shifting in positive ways.

2018-2019: Strengthening the Role of Pedagogistas

By the fourth institute in 2018, a natural evolution for the organization of the new teacher experiences occurred. A working group of pedagogistas, rather than the steering committee, assumed responsibility. The project had been investing in the professional development of pedagogistas for a few years. Beyond internal investments within our ongoing project work, Marina Castagnetti, retired teacher from Reggio Emilia, and Tiziana Filippini, retired pedagogista from Reggio Emilia, each visited the project to share their experiences and perspectives with pedagogistas and directors. Additionally, the pedagogistas and directors traveled together to Reggio Emilia, Italy, for a special week-long program of study in the spring of 2018. The new teacher experience seemed a generative opportunity for a working group of pedagogistas to organize and lead.

In the following section, three of the pedagogistas share reflections of their first year building a working style among pedagogistas from different schools responsible for the project’s new teacher experience.

New Teacher Experience Working Group Forms 2018-2019

By Candace Dupree, Patty Randall, and Susan Redmond

Our working group includes five pedagogistas from four of the project schools. It is interesting to note that all five of the pedagogistas in the working group were once classroom teachers. Thus, the working group has a particular affinity and empathy for teachers. We relate to teachers as they bump up against new ideas, new expectations, and new ways of working with children, families, and colleagues. In our experience, we understand that teachers build their knowledge and professional formation when given time to learn together.

In our experience, we understand that teachers build their knowledge and professional formation when given time to learn together.

We inherited the steering committee’s selection of the institute topic, “Listening as a Premise for Every Learning Relationship” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 114). Foundational to our beginning work was an intention to warmly welcome new educators into Project Infinity as co-constructing colleagues. Collectively, we value welcoming new children and parents over a long period, not for just a week or two in the beginning of a school year. We wanted this idea of extended welcoming to shape our way of thinking about new teachers. We wondered, could we continue to strengthen our approaches for welcoming our new teachers in a more deliberate, intentional way? How might we enhance our attitude of welcoming and their sense of belonging?
Based on this inquiry, we reviewed, *Indications: Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia* and drafted the following goals that could guide and build solidarity with new teachers:

- To build, develop, and maintain strong collegial relationships and engage in continuous discussion and interpretation of work
- To provide and establish ongoing teacher formation and theoretical enrichment
- To support the practice of constructing knowledge together
- To build understanding and awareness of the meanings and methods of education, the values of the Reggio approach, and the specific competencies of the professional role

Educators new to Project Infinity schools seek information about strategies associated with the Reggio Emilia Approach or the “how-tos” of everyday classroom life. They are even more interested in understanding the values that create this way of being with children and the “why” behind the experiences.

The summer weeks before the institute gave us time to revisit previous readings to invigorate our thinking about the meaning of listening and learning relationships. Carla Rinaldi (2006) described school as “a context of multiple listening” involving teachers and children “all of whom can listen to others and listen to themselves” (p. 67). Further, Rinaldi (2006) describes the relational quality of learning in this way: “[l]earning . . . is a process of relations . . . of construction by the individual in relation to others, a true act of co-construction” (p. 125). We asked ourselves, what role did listening play in our processes, and how could we further challenge ourselves to embrace a listening stance? What are opportunities to create a rich, relational context for learning?

With these questions in mind, we sought to design presentations, participatory ateliers, small group discussions, and shared viewings and reflections on video selections to delve into the possibilities and meanings of the topic. As one of our new teachers shared, “we learn
from each other in the same way that children do. They learn together in a sociable manner, fun, and productive. You can always learn something from someone else” (November 8, 2018). New teachers’ reflections gave insight and increased awareness of what they were thinking. In this way, the pedagogista working group had new information to use in planning future experiences.

Some of the reflections were shared within a large group discussion. This provided opportunities for all to exchange ideas, articulate beliefs, and form a shared sense of purpose.

“It’s so enriching to share our points of view and unique take on a question. It shows us the journey we are on in the schools of this project” (new teacher reflection, November 8, 2018).

“Children and adults like to feel a part of a group or community... You get that warm, wonderful feeling of being in a relationship even if you are totally different than that person. I see the value of relationships as they grow” (new teacher reflection, November 8, 2018).

**Strategies for Reflection and Dialogue**

As earlier mentioned, the work of the project often includes organized discussions of Reggio Children publications, or articles from *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange* written by Reggio Emilia educators. We found the book *The Hundred Languages in Ministories* to be a useful resource for supporting small group discussions and a strong reference for viewing and reflecting on documentation, always staying cognizant of listening to each other as our focus of study. As one participant shared, “there is nothing more complex than another person. Your potential for what you can learn is by how much you are allowing your relationships to grow with other people” (January 31, 2019).

Another book, *Tenderness*, served as an opportunity to study the ways adults can genuinely listen to children and give voice to their ideas. The book provoked strong feelings of joy, pleasure, and wistfulness among new teachers. It wasn’t surprising that the story of Laura and Daniele evoked a passionate whole group discussion. One new teacher shared:

[a] teacher told me that I didn’t know what love was when I was eight years old. I felt
unjustified and frustrated by this because my emotions were not being validated. It is important to encourage children to express themselves and to listen to the child when they say they love or hate or feel certain ways (January 31, 2019).

Another noted,

...children are new beings on the planet, they have only been here for a few years and we have been in the world for much longer. . . it makes me think how would it feel to think back on that time? How would it feel to be trying new foods, feeling love for the first time—bursting with passion? They (children) have so much thought behind the things that they do. They are acting out their own rationale. That is their truth. I think honoring that is very important—that pure sense of love and friendship (January 31, 2019).

We also created opportunities for new teachers to spend time visiting and studying different Project Infinity schools. This strategy of meeting peers in the schools was an important way for new teachers to encounter the everyday lives of the children, families, and educators. New teachers experienced the culture and identity of different schools, asked questions of their new colleagues, read the environment, and saw an array of possibilities within classrooms. New teachers experienced first-hand the shared values of Project Infinity schools.

Making Cognitive Reflections

As we were creating ways for new teachers to see themselves as part of our Project Infinity community, we were also developing our own ways for working together. Conversations were at times uncomfortable when new ideas were critiqued. However, this also brought important opportunities to hear another’s point of view. The collegial critique was a gift that often cleared the fog and clarified ways to move forward. We determined that ongoing reflection supported our group’s desire to improve our own listening capabilities.

Looking Towards the Future

As the new teacher working group looks to the future, we are inspired to consider how, “[o]ngoing professional development is both the right and duty of each individual and of the group, and is included and taken into consideration in the work schedule and organized collectively in terms of its contents, forms, and the methods of participation of each individual” (Preschool and Infant-toddler Centers – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, p. 13).

“Relationship is the primary connecting dimension of our system” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 62).
REFERENCES


Karen M. Haigh is semi-retired and currently consults with early childhood education (ECE) programs. She was a former associate professor in early childhood education and continues to study Reggio-inspired principles and practices in an American context. She works with schools or centers to study action research and inquiry-based learning, professional development, and emergent curriculum along with the role of observation and documentation. She has co-authored, We Are All Explorers: Learning and Teaching with Reggio Principles in Urban Settings. Karen was the former director of professional development for the Chicago Public Schools Early Childhood Education program. Additionally, she was the former director for Chicago Commons’ Child Development Program which studied the Reggio Emilia principles within Head Start, subsidized child care state pre-kindergarten, after-school, and family child care programs. Previously, Karen served as co-chair of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) board. She continues to serve on the board of “Crossroads for Learning” in Chicago.

Juana Reyes is an assistant professor in early childhood special education at Lewis University. She was a family worker for Head Start, a program director, and director of research and professional development for Chicago Commons, a community-based school. She is a consulting editor for Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange. She also continues to consult with early education programs studying the Reggio Emilia principles. Juana is particularly interested in approaches to professional development that promote critical thinking, dialogue, collaboration, and research.

Gigi Schroeder Yu is an assistant professor of art education in the art department at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM. She is also editor for the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) journal, Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange. Formerly, Gigi was the studio art coordinator for Chicago Commons. Her work continues to be inspired by the collaborations and meaningful relationships she formed during her work at Chicago Commons. Gigi works with organizations to create an aesthetic dimension toward teaching, learning, facilitation, research, and professional development design. She supports teachers in inquiry/action research projects.
Introduction

In 1991, after attending a study week visiting the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, the child development director of Chicago Commons, Karen Haigh, shared information about her trip with program staff. After learning about the schools in Reggio Emilia through Karen, and after some teachers participated in a regional seminar about the Reggio approach, staff were inspired enough to ask if it was possible to explore this philosophy within the Commons programs. And so, it began, with just a handful of classrooms in a multisite agency. Karen created a structure of professional development for teachers to begin to explore this approach. Initially, one classroom from each of the seven sites was asked to volunteer to explore the approach. Teaching teams met weekly to study documentation and discuss the ideas, intentions, and work of children. Teams included teachers, family workers, site directors, and an education coordinator.

At the time, Juana Reyes was a family worker transitioning into the role of a site director. To assist the education coordinator, she was asked to lead her team and the teaching team at another site. To support the growing program, Karen saw the importance of having additional education coordinators who worked similarly to the role of pedagogista. Furthermore, a studio coordinator position was created, envisioned as the Italian counterpart, atelierista. However, funds did not allow a studio coordinator at each site, so the role differed in that the studio coordinator worked more with teachers rather than children. In 2000, Gigi Yu joined the team as a studio art coordinator, and at that time Juana Reyes had transitioned to the role of manager of professional development and research to support the study tours of educators who came to see the programs.

In July 2019, Juana and Gigi sat down with Karen at her summer home in Door County, Wisconsin, to reflect on her many years of studying the Reggio Emilia Approach in diverse contexts and her recent semi-retirement. This article reflects their conversation.

Gaining Support to Pursue the Reggio Emilia Approach

Karen recognized the importance of gaining support for pursuing this approach from the administrative leaders at Chicago Commons. When asked about the organizational structures that were essential to exploring the Reggio Emilia Approach in an inner-city context, she responded:

You have to have support from above and support from below. I am amazed at how many people do not do this. Any idea I had, or I was trying to pursue, I always let my boss, Donald Duster, know so he would support it, or I would know right away if he wasn’t going to support it by how he responded. He was aware of what was going on, and in tune with it, and therefore cared about it. When you don’t regularly communicate and share what is happening or future ideas for the program with your boss, they tend not to connect or care about the work.

At Chicago Commons, the administration, at the time, promoted innovations and new ideas. They were not into doing everything the same way all the time. And that made a big difference when we began to explore the Reggio Emilia Approach. There are programs that are seen as good because they are in compliance, but all they do is follow the rules that they are given.
Early on, the programs considered the image of the child, a key principle of the approach. Program staff considered the messages about children and families that were conveyed through the program. We also began to make dramatic plans for each site’s environment, not just the classrooms but entryways, hallways, and common areas.

Karen’s work with Chicago Commons brought many changes through the study and interpretation of the Reggio Emilia Approach. When Karen left the program, she continued working with other schools who were interested in changing the culture of their programs.

Where to Begin: Starting Small and Creating Culture with Programs New to the Reggio Emilia Approach

As a consultant, Karen begins by assessing the organizational structure of a given program. She asks about the administrators of a given school/program and whether they support the values and principles of the approach. She also inquires about the structure of professional development. She noted that many programs have not developed or coordinated a framework for ongoing professional development. Questions that she asks programs/schools to consider:

- What does our system of professional development look like?
- What are the components?
- What are the internal experiences offered?
- What are the external experiences offered?
- What are more internal and/or external experiences you want to do?

So, along with the professional development system or framework, then I ask them to have a vision about what they want to do. And I think that also is a motivator for people, whether it be teachers or administrators, to have a vision of something you want to accomplish.
Karen continues:

So, along with the professional development system or framework, then I ask them to have a vision about what they want to do. And I think that also is a motivator for people, whether it be teachers or administrators, to have a vision of something you want to accomplish.

In terms of the consulting, I try to get a sense of the program and what they are interested in or wanting to pursue first. Usually they have a sense of it – usually it’s documentation, sometimes it’s a material, other times it is the image of the child, and often it is parent involvement.

Parent participation is viewed as a little different from parent involvement as one is more forced while the other is more inclusive and inviting. Also, parent participation is often what teachers want to initially pursue but I try to advise teachers to experience a more theoretical and practical understanding of the approach first themselves before attempting to help parents understand it. One of the best ways to help parents support and further understand the approach is to invite them to be part of a study or invite them to view documentation.

She said what is pursued is a “mixture of programs saying what they want, and me thinking about what would be best for them, too, and trying to merge the two together.” She explained that she tries to tease out whether a program is simply interested in making changes to one or two aspects of the program such as making changes with the learning environment, or if they are more interested in further exploring aspects of the approach where critical thinking, creativity, dialogue, and reflection become key. She tries to get a sense of their intentions and motivations before working with a program. When asked about how she does this, she spoke about how she uses her intuition. If a program seems to be only interested in changing the environment, she tries to point out that these changes can be superficial and talks with them about the complexity of the work. Likewise, if a program chooses something more complex to pursue, like collaboration, she begins by asking them what they think collaboration means. She challenges programs to move beyond the use of jargon. She asserted:

People don’t even know what they’re saying anymore, but they know how to fit it in a sentence well, and it sounds good, and it works. Whatever they want to work on, I start with, “What do you think that means?” Let’s start with talking about what the word means to you.

I love talking about what words mean and hearing the different perspectives. When you talk about what those words mean, it creates a little culture – a little group of people that think differently than they did before about the meaning of a word. And they focus on that word more than they did before and become more intentional within their work and its relationship to that word.

Studying Documentation: Menu of Possibilities and the Role of Imagination

After a focus has been identified, teachers begin to collect documentation. Regarding the process, Karen stated:

You have to start out slower, looking at the documentation and talking about it. I mean, this whole idea of looking at documentation and interpreting it is huge, because none of us are really taught on how to do that. Because we are not looking at the documentation to see/assess such things as small motor skills, or to see if they know how to make letters. We are looking at it to see what they are trying to pursue and what they are trying to accomplish, from their perspective. We don’t know the right answer; no one really does. You interpret the documentation and project possibilities. You consider what would be interesting to pursue, extend, and challenge. You also think about interesting questions to ask. This takes a lot of practice to know how to do that. And you have to hang in there and practice. What can happen with some teachers is after a couple months, they give up. Sometimes it might take six months for them to get, I call it, to get a flow, in terms of how to do that.

When Karen begins working with a new team, she noted that before using a protocol like the one developed for “We are All Explorers: Learning and Teaching with Reggio Principles in Urban Settings” (Scheinfeld, et al, 2008),
The re-launching, for me, is then just creating a menu of possibilities of where you can go next after viewing and interpreting children’s work and then seeing what happens.

Participation: “Getting Things Cooking”

Those who have worked with Karen, may have heard her refer to a time when things are really cooking. She suggested that for some teachers there is a shift in research and practice for educators during what is referred to progettazione in Reggio Emilia. During these regular meetings, Karen described this as a time when everyone is on board, and the teachers are excited:

This is a time to generate interesting learning experiences. In this moment, you are seeing children do things that maybe we have never seen them do before, we are hearing them say something that we have never heard them say before, and we are watching them interact with each other in a different way. When you look at the documentation, you get these interesting ideas, I don't know how to define this, but they're not the typical ideas of what you do when you’re doing a theme.

I run into a lot of teachers who will say, we can do this, and then we can do this, and then we’ll do sponge painting with it, and then we’ll do that – almost like they’re little robots, going on and on about what you do with the theme. It’s not that – it is asking interesting questions, it’s posing a new provocation, where we’re saying, I wonder what they’re going to do. You have no idea what they’re going do, or what they’re going
to those events—who you send, and who goes with whom. And then, there is internal professional development that you have going on at the same time. At a general in-service, you kind of charge people up for the beginning of the year in terms of what the focus is going to be and where we are going to go. But then you also have to have those weekly meetings where you look at the documentation and keep the work going.

Looking at the documentation can get monotonous or boring to people at some point if you don’t highlight or point out their strengths and their accomplishments, because they don’t point it out themselves. That is one way to keep things moving, the other is revisiting. If you have notes from a meeting, have them revisit what they said. This is also valuable for children. When adults and children see their words, work, or ideas presented (often visually), we are giving value to their voice. It’s also so great for children, when you put up their words in a room, because it is saying your words are really important. First of all, to see their ideas transformed into written words, and then putting the words up for everybody to see is pretty powerful. It is the same for adults. Secondly, when revisiting, you give one a chance to make meaning and sense of the experience.

Karen also shares quotes with educators and has a discussion around the meaning of the quotes: “I have them look at quotes and share what they think about them. There’s something about quotes that can inspire you. But I particularly choose quotes that relate to things that I think we need to work on.”

Here are some examples of quotes that Karen would share with staff:

“It’s planning for a process versus planning for an outcome. When you become unsettled you then say children are not interested, maybe it’s the teacher who is not interested because she does not know what to do (A. Gambetti, personal communication, June 1997).”

“The beauty of the job is to research – to use documentation in progress, to interpret, and to re-launch. It is time to think, to reflect, and to reorganize (T. Filippini, personal communication, June 2016).”
Collaboration and Participation

Karen mentioned that for her collaboration and participation work together:

It’s about hearing the different voices and the different perspectives of the children; and then hearing the different voices and the different perspectives of the teachers; hearing the different perspectives of the administrators; hearing the different perspectives of the support staff (social worker, family worker, or food aid). It could be so different, for so many different schools, but it’s hearing all those different perspectives and then coming to some kind of plan together on where you are going next – and then seeing what happens. Then coming back and looking at what happened. That is one way of looking at it, especially within a study. There are many different ways to collaborate in a school.

But the other part, is this idea of thinking differently about the classroom and children – and teachers tend to think this is my classroom, these are my children – if you have a collaborative approach, then it is not your classroom and your children. It is all of our classrooms, and all of our children together. It is a different mindset.

And then also to think about collaborating with parents, how are we inviting the parents? I remember Amelia used to talk about this idea. That is such a big question. And I think people do not think about it. You are inviting them. You are not saying you have to come. It’s inviting somebody to be a participant and hear their perspective or point of view.

When you are looking at children’s work, having these collaborative team meetings with administration and coaches involved with teachers, then it is not just the teachers doing their own thing. And I have to say, that within the majority of the public-school systems, it is the teachers doing their own thing, and it is their own classroom. Some teachers prefer the door to be shut and parents not to be involved. So, again, you are talking about a huge shift in thinking about this approach and how you work with everybody in terms of collaboration.

Leading Learning: Reggio-inspired Leaders

In Karen’s more recent work, she has focused on those who lead learning. Too often the school principal or director is focused on the management of the operations or business aspect of a program or school. There is a vacuum of leadership in regard to the learning. She spoke about the role of the principal or director as being ignored in terms of professional learning. These individuals should:

...not only support teachers, but challenge teachers to go beyond what they already know and already do. I feel like we're not developing anybody to work with teachers to become Reggio-inspired. These leaders of learning are charged with helping teachers imagine where you could go. We need to develop people in terms of being able to do that. One of the reasons why I think it’s not focused in on a lot is that it comes down to values. I don't think people value teachers’ ongoing learning. I think they’re still treating teaching like it is a profession where once you learn the skill, you are done. We are not developing those people to help advance the learning of teachers because we don’t value the teachers’ learning. I even think that when a teacher is interested in an ongoing learning process and working with children that attitude is going to come across with the children.

Comparing a teacher who is just doing the same thing as she did last year, versus a teacher who is, for example, in a book group, a discussion group, reading articles, or going to seminars – they have a different kind of energy with the children. That energy transfers to the children.

Hopes for the Future

Karen was asked about her ideas for the future, in terms of teacher education:

Well, something that I would like to see, if I were the head of the department of education, I would mandate that teachers have an hour a day to look at documentation and talk about the children’s work. It is kind of shocking, in education, how teachers are talking around children’s work, but they are not actually talking about the children’s work. They are looking at test
Approach. If the administration does not understand and support the work, it becomes too challenging to carry out. Finally, for somebody to look at assessment and Reggio-inspired programs – through doing projects, children are learning about math, literacy, and science in an experiential, collaborative way rather than through direct lessons or instruction. The children are also learning about the inquiry process, how to problem solve, how to relate to people, and the many, many ways to communicate. However, how are we showing this? So, I guess, if I had a magic wand, the hopes would be influencing administrators, looking at assessment, further supporting and challenging teachers, and teachers having time to work better with children through having time to review, interpret, and project possibilities for their learning experiences.

REFERENCES


Credits

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An Invitation to Participate in a Teacher Research Collaborative: Children and Trees in Relationship

**Reflecting Together**

by Jeanne Goldhaber for RIVET 2.0

Jeanne Goldhaber is an Innovations consulting editor and serves on the NAREA board. She is also a member of RIVET 2.0 (Reggio Inspired Vermont Early education Team), a group of early childhood teachers and teacher-educators who have a long history of collaboration and friendship and who are currently engaged in a teacher research collaborative, Children and Trees in Relationship.

In the 2019 September issue of Innovations, RIVET 2.0 extended an invitation to our NAREA colleagues and friends to share observations, images, artifacts, and video clips of children and trees in relationship. We are so grateful to those of you who responded! Specifically, we would like to thank Zhiying Gao, Lin Li, Liting Yang and Xingwei Song of the Baisha Forest Learning Center in Baisha, China; Kathy Hardy of the Winnetka Public School Nursery in Winnetka, IL; Eileen Hughes of the Child Development Center in Bellingham, WA; Melissa Hyde of the Casper College Early Childhood Learning Center in Casper, WY; Alison Mahar of the Boulder Journey School; Alison McPartlon and Tracy Jaramillo of the UNM Taos Kids Campus Center; Taylor Etchemendy of inspire Bilingual Early Learning in Taos, NM; and Nora Thompson of Washington, DC.

But primarily we would like to thank the children, families, and teachers for all they have taught us about life and learning. And trees.

And lest we forget, we thank every tree for her patience as we try to listen to her story. And learn how much it belongs to each of us.

The educators of Reggio Emilia urge us to listen to children. Indeed, this message was one of the first we heard in our early encounters with Loris Malaguzzi and Carla Rinaldi as they introduced the philosophical underpinnings of the approach to early education developed in the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Listening was presented as both a metaphor and as an explicit pedagogical practice. The metaphor of listening reminds us that children must never be anonymous, must never be discounted as immature, miniature replicas of adults but rather as inventors, artists, philosophers grappling with ideas, questions, and feelings that warrant serious consideration. This view underpins the necessity of listening in our daily lives with children. What are they telling us through their gestures? Actions? Words? Drawings? Paintings? Sculptures? Through the many languages that they use when we make them available?

To answer these questions, we must pay attention, observe, record. Then, in collaboration with colleagues, families, and the children themselves, we must discuss and reflect on the meaning-making that the study of our observations may reveal.

The metaphor of listening reminds us that children must never be anonymous, must never be discounted as immature, miniature replicas of adults but rather as inventors, artists, philosophers grappling with ideas, questions, and feelings that warrant serious consideration.
This view of children and the imperative to “listen” propelled the work of RIVET (Reggio Inspired Vermont Early education Team) in the early 2000’s. We met over the course of several years to share and reflect on our observations recorded in various Vermont communities, culminating in a small exhibit that shared the big ideas or threads that had emerged from our analysis of the work (Goldhaber, 2007). One of these threads reflected children’s high level of engagement with the flora and fauna they encountered in the natural world.

This intense period of collaboration then took a hiatus. While we continued to stay connected as friends and colleagues, we no longer gathered formally to share and discuss our work. Thankfully however, Peter Wohlleben’s book, The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries From a Secret World became the catalyst that brought us back together in 2017. Citing research in terms that made it accessible to the lay reader, Wohlleben describes trees as social in that they communicate with and care for each other through various means including olfactory, visual, and electrical transmissions.

This alternative framing of trees as active, social life forms rather than as inanimate objects prompted us to reconsider our observations that included children and trees.

This alternative framing of trees as active, social life forms rather than as inanimate objects prompted us to reconsider our observations that included children and trees. While we had used words such as “interaction” and “relationship” in the many observations we had collected that included trees as the recipients of the children’s attention, we had rarely considered or reflected on the specific contributions the trees were making to the experience. For example, while we may have noted a child hugging a tree’s trunk, we failed to record the texture, smell, and dimensions of the trunk. Was it cold or hot to the touch? Damp or dry?

This failure to consider a tree’s contribution was evident in many of our observations. While we may have noted a child tilting his head to follow the height of a tree trunk, we didn’t document the actual height of the tree or whether its upper branches were moving or bending with the air currents or whether its leaves were making sounds—sounds we might describe as rustling, or whooshing, or roaring. And what of the breadth of its branches and shape of its crown? And it’s not as if a tree stands in isolation—was the sunlight filtering through its branches and leaves? Were seeds, fruit, leaves dropping to the ground? Were there other trees that were participating in the overall experience?

Our observations fell short of this level of detail. As observers, we had failed to “listen” to the trees and as a result, the trees were silenced by our deafness and rendered anonymous in our observations.

The Challenge of Listening to Children, Trees, and Each Other

This challenge of listening is one of the primary threads that emerged from RIVET’s conversations about the multiple observations that our colleagues across North America and China shared. We asked each other and discussed questions such as:

- To which features of the tree might the child be “listening”?
- What might the child be thinking? Wondering? Feeling?
- In what ways does a child’s use of expressive languages through different forms of media reflect his or her thinking and feelings about the tree?
I’d like to add several additional questions that arose from our discussion of the submissions:

- How can we adults listen to trees? Can the children teach us to be better listeners?
- What is our role as we “listen” to children who are directing their attention to or interacting with a tree or trees?
- How can we teachers respond to children and trees (who we believe are in relationship) with the goal of protecting and nurturing the connection between them?

We grappled with these questions on a cold Saturday morning in February 2020, in Vermont, as we discussed the submitted observations, images, and video clips. We continued to share our thoughts online following our meeting. In the end we decided that sharing excerpts from each of the submissions provided a richer and more provocative opportunity for the wider NAREA community to think together about children and trees in relationship.

In the end we decided that sharing excerpts from each of the submissions provided a richer and more provocative opportunity for the wider NAREA community to think together about children and trees in relationship. Our only wish is that each of the contributors was sitting with us so that we could hear in full what we knew were unquestionably meaningful stories.

Trees and Children in Relationship: Observations, Images, and Artifacts

We are very excited by the prospect of reading your responses to one, several, or all of the following excerpts from conversations, observations, and images that we received from our NAREA colleagues. Please consider them in light of the above questions, but we also urge you not to feel constrained by them.

Teachers Who Listened

Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent children’s words.

The following are taken from transcripts and as singular comments of children in Taos, New Mexico; Boulder, Colorado; and Winnetka, Illinois.

“I like that they change like me—like when I lost a tooth—and get a haircut.”

“Roots go to the center of the world to drink together.”

“When the seeds open up, color comes out.”

“The leaves falling from the trees in autumn is like when your hands get tired and need to drop something.”

“Trees have branches. The leaves are like the hair of the tree.”

“Well, if you rip their branches and leaves off of them, they might be really sad. And if you are nice to them, they will give you apples.”

“There’s baby trees, and momma trees.”

Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent images and/or video clips.

Bellingham, Washington

A small group of toddlers participated in weekly walks around their university campus child development center to observe aspects of the natural world. The center is near a forested area and it is surrounded by the plant life of the Pacific Northwest. These were regular experiences happening at least twice a week for about 3 months.

The teacher noted how on several occasions the children identified various types of environmental sounds and decided to encourage the children’s observations that focused their attention to what they might hear in the environment. A young child put up her “listening tube” to the tree and was asked what sound the tree was making. She replied, “I hear a pop pop pop!”
Casper, Wyoming

The preschool children in Casper College Early Childhood Learning Center start the day off with engaging in the natural area located behind the school. Two years ago, we began utilizing our back area as an Outdoor Learning Environment. One child termed it the “wild” and that is how the children and teachers refer to it today. This area is open, windy, and may not be much to many people since it contains native weeds and plants, rocks, dirt and sometimes mud, and a few small Russian Olives and tiny pine trees.

One morning, Sara was observed sitting in the tree. She had positioned herself in the tree with her body on one branch, her back leaning against another, and her feet resting on a lower branch. Even though it was quite windy, she looked relaxed. Sara gazed west, towards the town; her face looking calm with a little smile on her mouth and half opened eyes. I said, “Sara, you look calm or relaxed.” She replied, “It’s peaceful here.”

Washington, DC

I was outside with my two-year-old grandson on a chilly, windy day. I was walking with him when I heard him say, “Oh no. Pick it up.” I often make videos of him to send to his parents at work while I take care of him so I realized that this could be something to capture. I switched on the video camera on my phone, turned around, and saw him holding a small branch of a tree with dead leaves on it, wiggling it from side to side. He seemed insistent to share his thoughts with a very serious expression.

He emphatically said, “Get it back! Arm back tree.” I said, “Put the arm back on the tree?” and he said, “Yeah.” I said, “Oh, how do you do that?” With his arm still extended, he looked at the branch and said, “Ummm...Grandma put it.” He offered the branch to me. I took it and said, “Oh Grandma should do it? Let me try and reach it.”

I saw a small tree next to us and stretched my arm up. I said, “I don’t know if I can. I’m not as big as that tree. I don’t know.”

He reached over and took the branch back while I said, “What shall we do?”

He immediately started walking towards his garage door, gently swinging the branch from side to side. He said, “Take it home. Take home.” I said, “Take it home?” and he said, “Yeah.”

He laid it down by the closed door and I said, “We could leave it by the door and when we go back in, we could put it somewhere.”

We continued our walk and he said, “Daddy and Mommy do it.” I asked him, “What would they do?” He said, “Put arm back tree.”

When his father came home that night, he took the branch to him and said, “Put arm back tree.” His father reached as high as he could and jumped up, but he couldn’t reach the branches to put it back. His mother tried later as well. Since no one could do it, he went and laid the branch at the bottom of the tree. He said, “Tree get it.”
The next day, we went out to see the branch, but it was missing, probably blown away in the really windy weather. He looked for it everywhere, looking up into the branches of the tree to see if the branch ended up there. He finally stopped searching, looked at me, and said, “Tree got it.”

Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent children’s drawings, paintings, and sculptures.

Boulder, Colorado

“Get it back! Arm back tree.”
Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent stories of ongoing experiences.

Taos, New Mexico: Tree Stories

In their study of trees, a pre-K classroom created tree stories:

Once there was a tree. It had lots of roots. The roots were on the tree. The tree was falling, it was huge. It grew tall.

Once there was a tree. The tree was a huge, big tree. It was so large that no one could climb up it. They were so hanging, and they had a hammered pat. There was a pine cone on it and it was fun because it wasn’t supposed to be there. The pine cone was so beautiful that it was cute and nice.

Once there was a tree in the forest. It had leafs and they fall down, It had dirt and apples. Yellow, red, and green apples. They need water and dirt to grow.

Once there was a tree. The tree was big and there was apples. The tree has leaves and branches. Birds live on the tree. The leaves are green and yellow.

Winnetka, Illinois: Journal

This year, our junior kindergarten class participated in a long-term study observing and chronicling relationships and change within ourselves, one another, and in West Elm Park. Several questions guided our project: What is a relationship? How do relationships grow and evolve? What qualities and values nurture the growth and evolution of a relationship? How do the children understand and describe a relationship? How do we document the children’s perceptions of change within themselves and as a classroom community?

We began by talking with the children about the concept of friendship and getting to know one another through play, rituals, and conversation. The children studied their faces drawing, collaging, and in verbal descriptive portraits noticing the subtle details. We talked about the best part of themselves and why we felt we were unique. We shared stories, ideas, and the foundations of democracy supporting the best decisions for our classroom even when we didn’t get our way. We cooked together, shared snacks, celebrated loose teeth, new babies and pets, cheered one another along with our classroom motto, “Can you do it? Yes you can!” They collected endless data about what we like, do not care for, what we can do, what we are working on and learned the value of being a friend in our class. All of these activities made us aware of ourselves, others, and the world around us.

As our relationships with one another strengthened, we developed another deep relationship with the natural surroundings of West Elm Park. At first, we would all run from one end of the park to another and enjoy the vastness of freedom. After several visits the children began to explore the trees, crevices in the ground, find treasures of acorns, leaves, and sticks, and a love for Katie, a large White Oak that resides in the park.

When a West Elm visit was announced the children cheered and always greeted Katie with a pat or a hug before running off to investigate what the park held for them that day, that season.

Fueling their interest in Katie, we researched, documented, drew, and painted pictures of Katie. Another question was offered: Can you be friends with a tree? Resoundingly the children respond “Of course!” and Katie became our friend for the year. We talked to experts about Katie, visited other trees, compared them to Katie, and learned how to take care of her so she could take care of us and our Earth. Visiting her often we were able to see and document her growth—just as we documented our own changes and growth all year long. We have all grown in mind, body, and spirit and will always have this special year in our hearts to keep forever.

The children’s voices are the key element in this project. We are so fortunate to be their partners and collaborators on this journey of discovery. They inspired us to create a beautiful classroom filled with a rich variety of materials to use as they make sense of the world around them. Asking questions, listening, and observing the children closely has guided us in planning and proceeding with the project. Their enthusiasm was inspiring and contagious, and we loved every minute of every day with them this year. We collected words and images from the children that guided our reflections.
Over the course of the year Katie has become a member of the class and the children think of her as a friend. Katie has also become an important home—school connection, as the children talk with their families about Katie and share their knowledge, classroom activities, and love for her. Many children shared stories of concern after a storm when a tree was damaged or cut down. One day, after a storm, we watched a tree being cut down and put into a wood chipper. This was very concerning for the children. Their faces showed concern, they were empathetic, and they had so many questions about what would happen next, how this could have been prevented, and it grew an awareness of other fallen trees in their neighborhood, front yard, and even in another state.

We know the connection with Katie blossomed into a friendship—Amelia made the beautiful analogy that tree roots look like they are holding hands, just like friends. We know that the children have a heightened awareness of trees, what they need to survive, how to care for them, and that you can be friends with a tree, just as we have learned what it takes to be a friend to one another. It gives us great hope for their futures, and the future of our earth.

Katie in the spring: “Trees are now my favorite things, because I can climb them. I like them in the spring best because they grow new leaves.”

“I see the little buds, way up there, do you see them?”

“Well, those are Katie’s leaves. They are going to pop open when it gets warmer.”

“Her bark is still on and I bet she’s drinking up the water.”

“I have counted 100 trees and they are on my map. Katie is still the biggest.”

“There is lots of healthy bacteria that is making everything greener.”

“Hello Katie, we love you.”

Katie in the fall: “The twigs are hope. They hope the leaves hang on.”

“Katie’s leaves are now brown, last time they were brownish red.”

“There are more of her leaves on the ground.”

“Because she’s old and tired. Maybe all of her leaves will fall just like old people’s hair falls out.”

“The tree’s leaves looked different today because the colors changed. They really were yellowish brownish and now they are red brownish.”

“They were green in the beginning.”

Katie in the winter: “Katie looks like she is taking a shower. Her branches are bare.”

“She’s cold because she’s outside and the snow lands on her branches.”

“It’s cold outside and some trees actually get cold. They lose their leaves, but the trunk is warm because it’s filled with water that gets sucked up into the branches and twigs. It makes the tree warm. When the leaves are gone the tree is naked, but the leaves don’t protect the tree, the bark does that.”

“If the bark falls off then she’ll be cold.”

“We could put tons of blankets on Katie to keep her warm anyway.”

Katie in the fall: “The twigs are hope. They hope the leaves hang on.”

“I see the little buds, way up there, do you see them?”

“Well, those are Katie’s leaves. They are going to pop open when it gets warmer.”

“Her bark is still on and I bet she’s drinking up the water.”

“I have counted 100 trees and they are on my map. Katie is still the biggest.”

“There is lots of healthy bacteria that is making everything greener.”

“Hello Katie, we love you.”
Facts About Katie
• Katie is a White Oak.
• The White Oak is the Illinois State Tree.
• Katie is approximately 150 years old.
• Katie can live over 350 years.
• Katie has roots, a trunk, branches, twigs, leaves, acorns, and a crown.
• Katie is good for the air and for us. She helps us breathe.
• Katie’s acorns feed the squirrels.
• Katie is 21 hugs in circumference.
• We love her.

“Katie’s roots look like they are holding hands, just like friends.”

So Much to Think About! So Much to Discuss!
We RIVETers had set aside a Saturday morning to talk together about the work that had been submitted and it became quickly apparent that three hours would not suffice. We went back and forth between talking in depth about one particular observation or even one line from a transcript and then found ourselves considering it from a more theoretical perspective.

For example, in our invitation to participate in this teacher research collaborative that was published in the September 2019 Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange (Goldhaber, 2019), we included a photograph of a tree that provoked a child’s unsolicited comment, “It’s a happy tree (p. 68)”! What about this particular tree caused the child to ascribe this particular emotion to it? Does the child interpret the shape of the branches that stretch upward from the trunk toward the sky as a smile? Does the breeze filtering thru the leaves make a sound that reminds the child of laughter? Or perhaps the sight of the tree makes the child happy and he assumes the tree must feel the same?

These speculations could also lead to a discussion about how we might have conversations or ask questions when we are in the company of children and trees. But first should we ask ourselves if our questions or remarks could lead children to “humanize” a tree, and if they do, are we depriving the children the opportunity to know the tree on their own terms and in their own language? Or conversely, by humanizing a tree’s identity are we offering children an invitation to connect with the tree in terms that we believe reflect their perspective, a perspective that is characterized by their references to parts of trees in terms of their own anatomy? Caution: one might find oneself getting “into the weeds,” arguing the relative merits or limitations of an anthropomorphic perspective (characterized by the attribution of human characteristics to non-humans) compared to those of an anthrocentric perspective (characterized by a view that we, humankind, are central, more important and qualitatively removed from other life forms)!

In any case, please consider joining us in this next step of our teacher research collaborative by studying and reflecting on the observations and images our colleagues from across North America and China have shared with us. Even if, or perhaps especially if you find yourself in the weeds, send your thoughts, theories, wonderings, and questions to jeanne.goldhaber@uvm.edu by June 1, 2020.

RIVET 2.0 will gather together once again, with you at our virtual sides, to consider the possible meanings we have ascribed to the children’s and trees’ encounters and ways through which we might learn more about and deepen their relationships.

As important, if the above observations and images serve as a provocation to send us an observation or an image (JPG please!) of a child and/or of an artifact that documents an experience you believe reflects children and trees in relationship or if you have your own personal story to tell, we would be delighted to receive it! Please include a signed photo permission for each child featured in your submission. You may request a photo release form from Thresa Grove: thresa@reggioalliance.org.

We look forward to hearing from you!

REFERENCE


A Tree Story from China

by Zhiying Gao

Zhiying Gao is the owner and director of the Living Preschool and Kindergarten (ages 2-7), a school for approximately 452 children ages 2-7 in Lijiang, Yunnan Province, China and founded the Baisha Forest Early Learning Center in Baisha, China in May 2017. She was a visiting scholar in early childhood education at the University of Vermont in 2013. Gao remains friends with those she was privileged to work with in Vermont.

This is My Story with Trees.

My home is located in the capital city Kunming of the Yunnan province of China. I am a child without any experience climbing trees. It is only the trees, tall Chinese Parasols on both sides of the pavement, which form my memories of trees in my childhood. Still fresh in my memory are their sturdy branches, which seemed like enormous arms stretched from their trunks to provide big umbrellas for the road. When summer was approaching, I was surrounded by the dense shade of trees. The sunshine of the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau was filtered into shade, so the road in front of my house was shrouded in the green rays of light. I still remember the mottled trunks. In winter, I sat in the blue bus with my mother, father, and elder brother and watched the grey branches outside the window. I felt so warm and then fell asleep unwittingly.

But in truth, I am a child who grew up with a nature-deficit disorder, a phrase I learned from The Last Child in the Woods by Richard Louv. Because I grew up in the downtown of a capital city, the opportunity to experience the pleasure of trees was limited to the public parks and although I lived near a park, trees of the park had signs posted on them that said "No Climbing."

The elementary school that I attended is the most famous one in our province. There were some tall trees at my school which maybe had a long history. When I was in classes, I appreciated the thick foliage outside the window, which was actually very beautiful. However, I have no memories of any of my classmates climbing the trees. My classmates in Kunming also shared the same experience. When I asked my best friend to remember games we played, she had almost no memory that was about nature.

Chinese culture is based on an ancient agricultural civilization. My father was born in the countryside, but he educated me that the countryside was very dirty. It was dirty because of the mud. What’s more, it was thought to be very dangerous outdoors. My father was extremely loving and generous and gave me so many presents so that I could enjoy the pleasures of life. But, he hid some precious objects from his childhood and forgot to give them to me because I was a girl. Compared with my brother who could go fishing and was allowed to catch insects from the tree trunks at any time, I lacked the opportunity to touch nature.

Many Chinese parents of this generation thought this way. It wasn’t seen as a kind of gender discrimination. They thought that this was the best way to show their love for boys and girls, so they often gave them different experiences and opportunities.

I met my husband when I was 25 years old. He was born in the Old Town of Lijiang, so he had many opportunities to romp in the countryside and nature. I often listened to his description about how he used to pick up apples from the trees planted by his grandmother and how he drifted along the river to his home with an automobile tire. Of course, he also envied that I could eat chocolates in my youth because he was an adult when he saw bananas and chocolates for the first time!
When I was 25 years old, I left my hometown to go to Lijiang because I wanted to live with him. I was met with tolerance, generosity, and kindness. The people of Lijiang were not only friendly to me but also gave me much assistance and inspiration. I admired their childhoods. That was the moment I realized I had been deprived of experiences with nature when I was a child.

In Lijiang, I had many opportunities to have activities in the countryside and nature. At first, I thought that many things in the village were not clean enough. The mud was dirty and the animals were dangerous. However, I suddenly developed a different idea about the soil. I realized that if there were no soil, everything would stop growing. Then, our planet would lose its vitality.

Yes, such an epiphany is so simple. Until the age of 35, I thought that the soil would make my clothes dirty! However, if you view the land as a commodity with value, it becomes very precious.

After this belated epiphany, I began to mull over the relationship between nature and children. As a long-time preschool educator, I wondered what would happen if a child born in China (where the agricultural civilization is regarded as the social foundation and where there is a close connection between nature and the countryside) is secluded from the countryside? Would he lose the connection with his own cultural genes? I felt the need to act.

Giving Children the Gift of Nature

We established the Liying Kindergarten in May 2001. There are more than 400 children studying there. The kindergarten is located in downtown Lijiang. Therefore, there is limited green area. We try our best to help the children build connections with the plants, such as planting vegetables in the limited outdoor space of the kindergarten. The children enjoy the pleasure of sowing seeds. They water the seeds, observe their growing process, and harvest them at the proper time. They share the food they cook with each other.
Recalling a Dream

I had a dream on the Chinese New Year’s Eve in 2017. I have been musing over the meaning of the dream for a long time. When I received an email from Jeanne Goldhaber and read her description of the book *The Secret Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben (2016), I recalled my dream which I would like to share to close my story.

The Spring Festival, especially New Year’s Eve, is endowed with strong symbolic significance for Chinese people. That night, I had a dream after the happy party with my family. In my dream, I was standing on a strange mountain. A flood was surging ahead and surrounded me at once. I tried so hard to escape and ran towards a higher place. After I found a spot with wooden stairs, I made continuous efforts to climb up the stairs. I was aware that the appearance of the stairs was very familiar. I had a strong feeling that this was a place I had been before.

As soon as I woke up on the first day of the New Year, I remembered my dream. It was so clear, which made me feel confused about the plot. I wondered whether there was any foreboding because I dreamed such a strange dream on the New Year’s Eve and it was so fresh in my memory.

We were very busy on the first day of the New Year. According to the custom of the Naxi nationality in Lijiang, we needed to worship our ancestors and hold a party in the ancestral home together with the whole family of my husband.

Since our Forest Early Learning Center is located near the ancestral home of my husband’s family, I decided spontaneously to see whether it was safe in the surroundings after the worship ceremony was finished.

It was sunny without clouds in the azure sky. I walked into the gate of the “Small Pine Tree” alone. All of a sudden, a drop of water fell on my head. After a close observation, I found that there was a line with accumulated water on the ground. Where did the water come? I raised my head and noticed that there were drops of water coming from the walnut tree by my side. But why is water dripping from the walnut tree? Our tree house was created...
around this walnut tree, so I climbed up the ladder of the tree house to have a close look where the water was coming from near the branches. When I was climbing the ladder, I recalled my dream the night before. In fact, the ladder I was climbing in my dream was the same as the one I was climbing now in the tree house!

The walnut tree is about 100 years old. When one of our school employees pruned the pine tree beside the walnut tree before the Spring Festival, he accidently snapped off one of the walnut tree’s branches. The tree was dormant at that moment so he didn't know that he had actually hurt it. The Spring Festival is a symbol of the approaching spring when everything grows exuberantly. With the upward moving of power and sap, the walnut tree began to bleed its sap, its life “blood” from the wound where the branch had broken off. If it didn't have a timely treatment, it might have died.

I dreamed of a flood, ladder, and escape on the most important night for the Chinese. The next day, I experienced the dripping of our walnut tree, climbing the ladder, and assisting the tree. I didn't think it was just a coincidence. Instead, I thought that trees had their own spirituality. They could ask for help from me. At least, this tree had its spirituality, because it has built connection with me.

At that moment, I watched it and thought of many things while lying in its hug.

Our grandmother walnut tree is safe at present. It bears numerous delicious and splendid walnuts every year. After the squirrel is full in the stomach, it gives the fruit to us as gifts. We still enjoy the shade brought by it. How wonderful it is. I can’t imagine what might have happened if I didn’t receive the distress signal that night, if it had left us at last? What would our small yard be like now?

I am grateful that it survived, but I don’t know what I can do for it to express my gratitude and to offer better protection for it. My mother-in-law told me the walnut tree likes to stay with people. If the walnut trees in the village are secluded from human activities, they will stop bearing fruit. However, if the elders gather here and chat with each other or there are children playing under the trees, they will make the appearance of vitality and exuberance.

There are various trees around our little forest school. Two pine trees can bear delicious pine nuts. Nevertheless, they somehow withered in the consecutive two years.

The death of every tree makes me extremely sorrowful.

I was touched by the RIVET research. If I can participate in the research with the children, I would think of it as a present to Mother Nature and ourselves.

Trees are nourishing the children, but in what kind of invisible ways? What is the meaning of the interaction between children and trees for the latter? What presents do the trees want to get from children?

Trees are nourishing the children, but in what kind of invisible ways? What is the meaning of the interaction between children and trees for the latter? What presents do the trees want to get from children?

All of these questions are so interesting and I am eager to explore them with you.

REFERENCE


Credits

Image courtesy of Zhiying Gao. All rights reserved.
PERSPECTIVES ON NAREA

The 11th NAREA Winter Conference Livestream “Defending Thoughtful Learning, Human Competence, and Human Dignity”

by NAREA

“We’d like to thank the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Reggio Children, and all of the citizens of Reggio Emilia for their forbearance and their creativity during this very difficult time. As well, we hold close in heart all those in the Italian areas suffering from the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.”

With that, Margie Cooper, North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) standing chair, opened the 11th NAREA Winter Conference Livestream. She continued by sharing these words from Loris Malaguzzi, spoken during an international conference in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in 1990:

“I would like to quickly give a sort of strong message, an image of a political, geographic, and economic nature. It is an image that takes us into the changing of the world. A world no longer made of islands, intervals, spaces, oceans, and mountains but a world made of a network. It is a powerful image. It not only leads us into a shrinking world, it also describes a world different from the world of the past. Now we begin to see a world not made of coexisting islands, separate parts, distant unique languages, but a world held in a web. Migrations, changes of tradition, changes of language are all in this web. We must think of everything happening today, everything that will happen in the next few years, to understand it is a powerful image to keep. . . .

A world of networks is a world that communicates even when it does not wish to, a world which has the same destiny even when it seeks out partial, different destinies; a world where beliefs, old fundamentalisms and new ones, will perhaps come around again, we do not know how or in what way, we do not know how history will resolve its knots (Cagliari, Castagnetti, Giudici, Rinaldi, Vecchi, & Moss, 2016, p. 390).

Loris Malaguzzi reminds us of our connections to each other all around the world and how we are all held together in a network that communicates together.

Loris Malaguzzi reminds us of our connections to each other all around the world and how we are all held together in a network that communicates together.
with Project Infinity. Due to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 virus, a decision was made to offer the conference to registrants by way of a live-streamed webinar.

Participants met together from their living rooms, kitchens, and home offices and connected to the speakers from Reggio Emilia on their laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Chat functions in the webinar helped us connect our questions, thoughts, and comments to Valentina Violi, pedagogista, Massimo Ghirardi, atelierista, and Jane McCall, interpreter, who practiced social distancing while sitting in an empty meeting room inside the Loris Malaguzzi Center.

During the first day, we encountered a presentation about the educational experience of Reggio Emilia which included historical notes and the story of its evolution. The presentation highlighted the values of belonging, participation, and the image of the child. Valentina Violi shared these thoughts with us:

This idea of participation is a value but it’s also a strategy, a way of working that defines and gives quality to the way that children, educators, and parents are all stakeholders
and part of the educational project. This is a way of generating and nurturing the feelings and the culture of solidarity, of responsibility, and of inclusion in this educational project.

Education is an opportunity, an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of each individual but also an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of the entire community. This idea of the whole community being emancipated and growing makes the infant-toddler centers and preschools a place of meeting, a place where we meet together and practice our democracy, practice our freedom. It’s a place where we say that we practice every day this idea of welcoming others, of welcoming difference in order to have peace.

Children are capable of interpreting the reality around them and of giving that reality new meaning, new significance. This is possible, we believe, when children have around them adults who are sensitive adults with a sensibility towards their capacities. These are adults who are capable of listening, capable also of waiting. Adults who are capable of giving the children time and of also giving themselves time.

This Winter Conference was one of complexity, in the organization and planning of the virtual conference and in the work shared by the Reggio educators. Through videos and presentations, over the course of two days, Massimo and Valentina underscored the importance of teacher formation, research, observation, documentation, the environment, rich materials, and rich thinking. Massimo said:

This professional learning is something that plays out very much in our daily lives. Our daily lives offer many opportunities for reflection. We do our reflection through observing, documenting, interpreting and every week, each member of our staff has a weekly update meeting together with others so that they can share their reflections in the work that they’re doing.

Massimo offered us a glimpse into the environment of Martiri di Sesso, a municipal preschool in Reggio Emilia. His guided tour began at the entrance, which promotes transparency, welcoming, communication, and relationship. Throughout the school, we saw the many ways participation comes alive on a daily basis—documented, interpreted, re-launched, and ongoing. During the tour he shared:

So, an entrance is something that all of our buildings have. We have always believed that an entrance doesn’t mean closed doors. We think of our entrances as a sort of a diaphragm or a membrane between indoors and outdoors that as we approach them, let people have a glimpse of the life they might find inside the building.
staying connected to the children and families during this time of isolation. The speakers addressed the questions on the last day, giving careful attention to the underlying value connected to the answers.

Valentina, Massimo, and Jane addressed the last question, “How are you staying connected to children and families during this time of isolation?” With emotion in their voices, they answered and we heard how they are working to reach out to the children and families in the schools, the people in the city, and the world through a new section on the Reggio Children website called “At Home with the Reggio Approach” (www.reggiochildren.it/acasaconilreggioapproach). We are inspired by the ways the educational project of Reggio Emilia is always working to defend thoughtful learning, human competence, and human dignity as they face the future and all it brings.

When we think in our work about the entrances into our schools, we’re giving shape to one of the values that Valentina mentioned earlier when she talked about this word in Italian, accoglienza, which literally means embracing and taking to oneself. It is very often translated as welcome, but it actually has an action of bringing things to us. So immediately we have this idea of spaces which say things, which talk to us.

So, we have to think of the entrance as a sort of daily newspaper. This is the school newspaper as you arrive, the entrance is telling you about the daily life inside the school. It tells you about what kind of topics and subjects we’re looking at in the life of our school. It tells you about the opportunities that your city is offering you on many different levels, cultural events. And what is very, very important to us is always the question and about the entrance, the question is – who is it that we are embracing and welcoming? Who is it that we are communicating for?

Throughout our time together, participants posted “chat” messages and questions for the speakers. Words of welcome, well wishes, and comments of concern were intermingled with questions about teacher collaboration time, creating generative questions, culturally competent teachers, opportunities for documentation, and ways Reggio teachers are staying connected to the children and families during this time of isolation.

We are inspired by the ways the educational project of Reggio Emilia is always working to defend thoughtful learning, human competence, and human dignity as they face the future and all it brings.
children at home, having put together groups with email addresses or WhatsApp groups. But, we also have journeys which are taking place, organized on a more city level... What the city administration has asked us to do now is to create a daily appointment for everybody in the town with children of this age so we're thinking about the television... We have local newspapers and a local television channel we can use...the municipality has a website, the Instituzione of Reggio Emilia has a website, and Reggio Children is also working in this direction... We are thinking about a daily appointment that people can turn to for shared ideas, not just for the children in the preschools and infant-toddler centers run by the municipalities, but that every family in the city can share together.

Families really are interested in maintaining contact. The very hands-on suggestions that we’re sending out to the families are a source of enthusiasm for them. Just an example from the Tondelli preschool. We've had a weekly appointment on Monday. We asked our cooks to suggest a recipe that families could make at home so we sent out a recipe for biscuits, for cookies. We asked all the families to take photographs of their biscuits or cookies and so we have a shared place where all those photographs can go together and everybody can look at each other’s outcome.

At the Tondelli preschool, we had been working on sowing seeds and what happens to seeds as plants grow. So, one of the suggestions we have sent out to families is that if they can find any kind of seed at home, we suggested they plant a seed and that they try to keep a record of what happens to the seed, take photographs of it, or drawings of how it grows. Everybody will bring that plant back to the school when we can go back together, and we will dedicate a part of our garden to the plants that have grown. All these seeds that people have planted will be a kind of collective.

With deep respect and gratitude to all who participated, we conclude with a special word of appreciation to the educators and families from First Baptist in Greenville, South Carolina, for all they prepared and organized to host the conference. It was a pleasure thinking, learning, and wondering together.

“We’re very happy to be here with you remotely, but together, and as Margie Cooper says, like the whole world today, we are in a sort of communion.” – Valentina Violi

REFERENCE

Right after the war I felt a pact, an alliance, with children, adults, veterans from prison camps, partisans of the Resistance, and the sufferers of a devoted world. Yet all that suffering was pushed away by a day in spring, when ideas and feelings turned toward the future, seemed so much stronger than those that called one to halt and focus upon the present. It seemed that difficulties did not exist, and that obstacles were no longer insurmountable.

LORIS MALAGUZZI
The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education
1993, p. 49
In 1990, Carolyn Edwards and I traveled to Italy, joining our colleague Lella Gandini (living in Florence at the time), to engage in an intense week of dialogues with Loris Malaguzzi and the educators at the Diana School in Reggio Emilia. Our book, finally published in 2015 as a resource for the field, takes you inside those extraordinary encounters, shares transcripts of the classroom video documentation at the center of our dialogues, and explains the research that framed our approach and thinking. It is a snapshot in time, and like all history, this chance to be a virtual “fly on the wall” for the unedited dialogues of Reggio educators, especially Loris Malaguzzi, helps inform our understanding of what we see and hear now in the Reggio Emilia experience as we head into a new decade.

It is impossible for me to reflect on this experience without first acknowledging the enormous debt to the insight and wisdom of my mentor Carolyn Edwards, who was pivotal in interpreting the experience of Reggio Emilia in the United States and elsewhere in the world, and who sadly passed away too early in 2018. As her doctoral student (1988-1992), I fondly remember the debates and conversations we had over the video-editing machine 30 years ago, and more recently as we edited this book and recollected so vividly our experiences in Reggio Emilia.
The Framework for Our Research

The broader framework for our research project emerged out of our shared questions about the meaning and role of collaboration, conflict, and community-building in both the Reggio educators’ approach to learning in early childhood, and in their way of working with each other as colleagues. We saw the historical and cultural contexts of the Reggio Emilia schools as critical to understanding the educators’ powerful image of the child and their focus on democratic participation. As such, the cooperative spirit we saw so clearly in Reggio, and which challenged the cultural mainstream of individuality in the United States, was the “water in the fishbowl” that we hoped to make more visible from the perspective of the “fish.”

Inspired by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson’s (1989) use of edited videotape of potent classroom episodes as a methodology to invite teachers to reflect on their own practice and the actions of teachers from other cultural settings, Carolyn proposed to Malaguzzi and Sergio Spaggiari that we present edits of video she had collected in Reggio for her study of the teacher’s role in 1988 to engage the educators in an analysis of how they view their role in the collective life of the classroom.

The Reggio educators, including Tiziana Filippini and Vea Vecchi who were central to the project, promptly rejected our videos as the basis for the inquiry, preferring to collect and edit their own video that would focus on specific encounters between small groups of children. Still, they embraced the methodology and our mutual desire to understand more about how learning is co-constructed in the context of children’s shared inquiry and tasks. At the time, Reggio educators were known for their use of still photography, along with audiotapes and written notes, to document the learning of children. Our proposal to use videotape as a medium was immediately questioned, with an insistence that detailed transcripts of the dialogues were critical. While Vea Vecchi noted early on that video could offer the complexity of the entire process, in our final meeting Malaguzzi shared, “the video does not represent, but instead it ‘reads’” (Edwards, Gandini, & Nimmo, 2015, p.122) and along with others lamented the limitations of the medium.

A Way of Working Together

What was most notable to us was the intensity of research thinking that the Reggio educators brought to the project. In the book you will find some of the detailed and precise coding and visual mapping prepared by teachers as documentation for our video-reflection discussions, and which challenged us to think with greater complexity about the specific moments.
of cooperation. Their choice of episodes intentionally enabled them to consider the dynamics of group size, the impact of gender and age, and the particularities of cooperation with different representational media, including clay, wire, and drawing with a computer. Filming was typically undertaken by one of the teachers and their focus was on the children’s interactions, not the role of the teacher.

Initially, the teachers at the Diana School sent us six videos of different episodes that they partially transcribed for us in Italian (and we subsequently translated), of which four were discussed in our reflective meetings. Additionally, the teachers presented a further three new video episodes when we arrived in Reggio Emilia and which also become the subject of our meetings with the educators. A final meeting with a larger group of about 50 educators from various Reggio Schools was focused on a cross-cultural encounter with video we had collected and edited from a progressive school in Amherst, Massachusetts, but which became very limited in scope due to the complexities of translation and technology. The complete English transcripts of all five evening meetings during our intense week at the Diana School are shared in our book, along with some of our editorial comments about the possible intended meanings of the protagonists. In addition, we offer our transcripts in English, some complete and others partial, of the nine edited classroom video episodes offered to us by the teachers.

The meeting transcripts provide fascinating insight into how Malaguzzi, and key mentors such as Vea Vecchi (ateliertista) and Tiziana Filippini (pedagogista), engaged educators in a critical and often emotionally intense process of co-constructing their analysis of teaching and learning. Malaguzzi noted before the meetings began, “It is best to collectively look at the video and then obtain a range of points of view and different interpretations that then need to be discussed to reach a ‘common point of view’” (Edwards, Gandini, & Nimmo, 2015, p. 28).

Each reflective session began with the teacher sharing the context and their detailed analysis of the episode video. In each case, they had already edited the raw video considerably to focus on the moments they viewed as leading to and constituting cooperation and conflict. As an observer, I remember the specificity and lively nature of their critiques of the environmental setups and teacher strategies that followed, often led by Malaguzzi at length, but also involving other educators in sometimes heated, but good natured and clearly collegial exchange. Malaguzzi joked at the end of one long evening, offering a kind of olive branch to his colleagues, “We always have to have two pockets: one pocket for satisfaction and one pocket for dissatisfaction” (Edwards, Gandini, & Nimmo, 2015, p. 81). He comfortably moved in and out of theoretical connections to and critiques of Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, and Italian theorists, using complex metaphor, terminology, and humor (often drawn from his Catholic upbringing) that belied a simplistic understanding of the topic under study.

Understanding Collaboration and Conflict

My own desire at the time was to look at community life in the Reggio schools in ways that reached beyond the kinds of sociability that are an accepted part of early childhood programs in the United States, including prosocial skills such as friendship, empathy, and generally getting along with others. I believed (and still do) that we often confuse cooperation, operating together to achieve a task (often someone else’s task), with collaboration, which I see as the joint elaboration of ideas – moving beyond stating and sharing multiple perspectives to create a new understanding.
The dialogues by the Reggio educators in our book reveal their persistence in identifying moments of conflictuality (both “sweet and “hard”) as the children engaged together around a problem, that they variously termed cognitive knots, hot spots, times of trauma, and crisis points. Malaguzzi, in particular, is heard differentiating between points of harmony and “sentimentality” in the small groups, and the moments where the children truly co-constructed deeper levels of understanding. Malaguzzi concluded, “If conflicts don’t arise, if there are no confrontations, if there aren’t moments in which there is a losing of equilibrium, if the certainty doesn’t leave the room for uncertainty, if a child doesn’t accept the flux of insecure moments, the climbing up stops” (Edwards, Gandini, & Nimmo, 2015, p. 48). The educators examined the nuanced dynamics of leadership, friendship, and the varying roles learners take as they negotiate a problem space. There is something exquisitely beautiful and perceptive about the way in which they described the dance of the children; their “seduction” of each other’s ideas, their use of humor, and the “unifying moments” in communication and purpose.

These dialogues, in which the Reggio educators engaged with such passion, civility, and intentionality, suggested to us that one of the key ways in which young children learn how to collaborate is through being able to observe, listen, and to hear adults collaborating, including their ability to enter into and use “the heat” of conflict.

Conclusion

Carla Rinaldi (2006) reminds us that Reggio is in dialogue with Reggio. While very aware of the history, foundations, and values of their remarkable journey in early education, the Reggio Emilia educators understand that they are part of a dynamic process of exchange that is responsive to changing social and political contexts. Indeed, the dialogues from 1990 were once again grounded in the educators’ perceptions about cultural differences between Italy and the United States, with Malaguzzi predicting change on the horizon. Today, I see a growing complexity and urgency in their vision and strategies for citizenship as their schools respond to an increasingly diverse city. With this important caveat in mind, we invite you to journey back to an important time in their history and to experience and think with the educators as they wrestle with one of the fundamental issues in their work under the powerful mentorship of Loris Malaguzzi.

REFERENCE


Message from Reggio Children

The office of Reggio Children is pleased that there is so much interest in North America about our infant centers, preprimary schools, and educational philosophy. We note with pride the resources published and professional development initiatives organized about the Reggio Emilia approach to education. We caution interested educators that some resources and initiatives related to the Reggio Emilia approach have not accurately reflected our experiences and philosophy. In order to ensure accurate representation of ideas concerning Reggio, we urge publishers and producers of resources as well as organizers of initiatives concerning the Reggio Emilia approach to coordinate their plans with Reggio Children, s.r.l., via Bligny 1/a, 42100 Reggio Emilia, Italy. www.reggiochildren.it

Organizations

**NAREA**
North American Reggio Emilia Alliance
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Reggio Children Publications

Resources published by Reggio Children are available:
In the U.S. from NAREA
770.552.0179
narea@reggioalliance.org
www.store.reggioalliance.org

In Canada from Parentbooks
416.537.8334
orders@parentbooks.ca
www.parentbooks.ca

Bibliography

Visit the NAREA website for a comprehensive listing of resources related to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy.

North American Study Groups in Reggio Emilia, Italy

Contact: Angela Ferrario,
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International Professional Development Initiatives in Reggio Emilia, Italy

To be announced.

Innovations

*Innovations* has an open call policy for article submissions for the Spring, Summer, and Winter issues annually. For information on the annual peer-reviewed issue published in Fall, please see the NAREA website.

Contact: Thresa Grove
thresa@reggioalliance.org
www.reggioalliance.org

NAREA Brick by Brick Series

**April 18, 2020** (postponed until further notice)

Thinking Through the Artist’s Lens: Interpreting, Learning, and Communication through the Languages of Material

Johnson City, Tennessee

Speakers: Jeanne Goldhaber and Jane Broderick

Contact: Thresa Grove
thresa@reggioalliance.org
www.reggioalliance.org/events
NAREA Professional Development

Discount for NAREA members

The 16th NAREA Summer Conference
The Complexity of Trying: Time to Think, Search, Create, Understand, and Create Meaning
Atlanta, GA
June 25-27, 2020
Speakers: Representatives from Reggio Emilia
Exhibit: “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material”
Contact: NAREA

This conference will be in-person or virtual depending on the circumstances at the time

The First NAREA Fall Conference
Further information to be announced
Save the dates:
November 13-15, 2020
Speakers: Representatives from Reggio Emilia
Exhibit: “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material”

NAREA & Reggio Children Resources

NAREA is the official distributor of Reggio Children resources for the United States, and will perform this activity along with other collaborations between NAREA and Reggio Children within the International Network framework. These collaborations include organizing conferences and seminars with participants from Reggio Emilia, Italy, and “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” and “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” exhibit projects.

Charter of Services of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools

Through the combined efforts of Istituzione, Reggio Children, and NAREA, we bring you a resource from Reggio Emilia: the English translation of the Charter of Services of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools. This book is given to every family as they begin in the infant-toddler centers or preschools to qualify the public services. Included are descriptions of how a school day is organized, the culture of the atelier, the way the kitchens work, and the priority access for the children with special rights, for example.

Cost: $15 + S/H

Bordercrossings

In digital environments, as with all educational contexts in Reggio Emilia’s municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, children act as authors and constructors of their own knowledge, and of their own individual and collective imaginaries, disproving the idea of anaesthetising technology at the center of attention, and making visible a different amplificatory and generative idea. This catalogue recounts an exhibition, “Bordercrossings – Encounters with Living Things / Digital Landscapes,” which has gathered and exhibits projects realized in Reggio Emilia’s municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools: nature close-up, seen and investigated by the senses, theories, and actions of today’s children, and by analogical and digital equipment connected.

Cost: $40 + S/H

Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material

This catalogue presents the exhibition “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material,” a collection of works by children of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia. Drawing and telling stories means imagining, analyzing, and exploring spaces, forms, colors, words, metaphors, emotions, rhythms, and pauses, entering into a narrative dimension that is both internal and external to the self, playing on reality, fiction, and interpretation. Though drawing and words are autonomous languages, for the children words and stories, silent or spoken, almost always go hand in hand or intertwine with the drawing, creating an intelligent and often poetic mosaic.

Cost: $38 + S/H

If you are interested in purchasing these resources, please visit the shop section of the NAREA website: www.store.reggioalliance.org

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Visit reggioalliance.org for regularly updated initiative calendars.
Infants and children in all places in the world cannot continue to have rights only on paper; the right to have good parents, good housing, good food, good schools, good teachers, and good government is what they ask for and what is urgently needed. If we adults will keep in mind that the children are always the holders of new possibilities and perspectives—and not only in the field of learning and of knowledge—perhaps we will not carelessly dissipate, with guilty nonchalance, the good that they, along with we, possess.

– Loris Malaguzzi, Innovations, v. 1, no. 1, Fall 1992