

# Reflections on Reggio Emilia

Sue Bredekamp

**M**y recent visit to Reggio Emilia, Italy—along with several other opportunities to study their approach to educating young children, including visiting the museum exhibit, “The 100 Languages of Children,” reading the new book by the same name (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993), attending symposia in this country, and engaging in discussion with valued colleagues such as Lilian Katz, Carol Brunson Phillips, Helen Taylor, and Teresa Rosegrant—caused me to reflect deeply on my own work—my past teaching experiences and my work at NAEYC on accreditation and professional development—as no other experience has ever done. As Loris Malaguzzi told our delegation of Canadian and American educators, “Adults experience trauma when they realize that their certainties are no longer certain.” Like many other discoverers of Reggio, I also experienced the “trauma” of having my certain notions about child development and early childhood education challenged.

Upon reflection, the experience has affected me in paradoxical ways. I was inspired to see the potential of well-funded, well-conceptualized early childhood programs, and I was simultaneously

depressed to think of how few children in the world are provided such opportunities. Another paradox I experienced was the feeling that my own views were confirmed and reinforced by observing such excellent exemplars while also feeling guilty that perhaps we, in America, have set our sights too low in our vision of excellence for all children. A third paradox I confronted was my conclusion that the approach of Reggio Emilia educators is both old and new. Fundamentally, the principles of the Reggio Emilia schools are congruent with the principles of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), as described by NAEYC (Bredekamp, 1987), presumably because both sets of principles share some of the same philosophical origins. At the same time, the educators in Reggio Emilia have gone beyond DAP, at least its current incarnation, especially in their emphasis on the social construction of knowledge and their articulation of the teacher’s role as co-creator with children and documentor of the learning process.

Perhaps the most positive feeling I experienced during my visit to Reggio and in subsequent conversations since then is the excitement (and discomfort) that comes from learning. The educators in Reggio Emilia stress that they do not consider their approach a model and that they are always

examining, reexamining, and adapting their practice as they learn more. They believe that visitors should leave with more questions than answers, and this goal is usually accomplished. They effectively model the concepts of reflection in education, the teacher as researcher, and, stated most simply, the teacher as learner. An encounter with their approach is powerful precisely because it makes people think, makes them want to discuss their thoughts with colleagues, and motivates them to action. Numerous lessons can be learned, implications extracted, or adaptations attempted in applying the principles in the United States, and that work is well under way in many places (see Katz, 1990; New, 1990, 1993; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Based on my personal reflections about Reggio Emilia, I offer six challenges to NAEYC and early childhood educators in the United States. (The views expressed in this article represent the author’s opinions and are not statements of NAEYC.)

## *Reclaim the image of the competent child in America*

At the core of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is the image of children as competent. Reggio educators believe that the quality of their schools results in large part from this image of a competent child who has rights, especially the right to outstanding care and education, rather than only needs. They believe that viewing children as needy permits adults to do the very least for them, while recognizing children as competent requires that we provide them with the best environments and experiences possible. Respecting children as competent also requires that they have competent teach-

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ers who are, in turn, respected and well compensated. The entire approach builds on and reinforces the image of the competent child; for example, even the most uninformed observer could probably clearly see the competence of 11-month-old Lucia (p. 10).

The challenge for educators in America is to reclaim the image of the competent child. In a country as diverse as the United States, promoting a single image of children is a challenging and potentially dangerous task. We are confronted daily by messages about the readiness (or lack thereof) of young children for school; we are deeply saddened by the real vulnerability of children who are exposed daily to violence and other negative forces. In fact, overemphasis on children's competence can lead to abuses: If infants are so competent, why is parental leave necessary? If preschoolers are so smart, why not start formal reading instruction at age two? If kindergartners are competent, what could be wrong with push-down curriculum? One could argue that the image of the competent child, widely promoted in the 1970s, directly contributed to some of the problems in child care and early education that the 1980s were spent trying to fix. So why reclaim that image now, in an era when the needs of children and families are greater than ever before?

Precisely because children deserve so much more than they are receiving, we must do a better job of educating the public about their competence. As is so often the case, past attempts to promote this image led to an overreaction followed by an opposite overreaction. My colleague, Teresa Rose-

grant, succinctly described the situation as a choice of error between "stretching children on a rack or putting them in a box." The image of children as competent too often led to rack stretching, as evidenced by the above examples; what happened were efforts to make children even more competent by pushing them to accomplish tasks or activities previ-



*Teachers have set up a favorable environment for this child's exploration at her own pace. They observe her with the camera.*

ously reserved for older children or to transform them into miniature adults. In reaction, prominent child advocates like David Elkind (1981, 1987) cautioned against hurrying children and miseducating them, and NAEYC strongly promoted "developmentally appropriate practices" in an attempt to better match expectations to children's development. With the American penchant for polarizing complex issues, these efforts were sometimes misinterpreted to mean that instead of "stretching children on a rack," appropriate action would be to "put them in a box"—overprotect, cease to challenge, give them the gift of time, let them grow at their own biologically dictated pace, and water down the curriculum. Neither extreme approach is appropriate or desirable.

Awareness of these past misunderstandings should inform attempts to advocate for a more

complex image of childhood that draws on current knowledge of child development and learning and demands excellence in early childhood educational experiences but also supports the development of competence and a sense of well-being in children.

### ***Promote conceptual integrity in programs and experiences for children and adults***

One of the more attractive aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach, and perhaps what makes it work so well, is the degree to which the approach is conceptually integrated within itself while also providing conceptually integrated experiences for children. Gandini (p. 5) emphasizes that the fundamental principles are so interrelated that they cannot be considered separately. Reggio educators justifiably fear that American educators will put blue bottles of water in bathrooms or use tablecloths and believe that they have implemented the Reggio approach. The aesthetically beautiful environments in Reggio Emilia schools are impressive, but they are conceptually connected to the image of the child, the nature of the learning process, the concept of collaboration, the role of documentation, the cultural context, and all the other fundamentals of the approach. The challenge for American early childhood educators is to articulate our fundamental beliefs in ways that will, of course, be different but equally sound conceptually.

A related observation is the degree to which projects and learning experiences in general provide opportunities for rich conceptual development and deep understanding. Partly a product of time spent but also the result of col-

laboration among small groups of children and teams of teachers, projects support depth in thought and experience. By contrast, Rosegrant again provides the succinct analogy: American curriculum is more like "Trivial Pursuit." The curriculum is too often a series of brief encounters or superficial exposures that are aptly referred to as "covering" or, more simply, "doing," as in "We did the farm in the fall; we are doing the zoo in the spring" or "You did dinosaurs in kindergarten; we do real work in first grade." Such a shallow approach to study undermines children's attention spans and dispositions to persist. Children say, "Read it again," about a favorite book every day for five years; what could possibly be wrong with revisiting the farm to gain additional insight and reconstruct their past understandings based on new experience and knowledge constructed in the interim? Reggio educators' documentation of sophisticated hypothesis development and conceptual development is powerful support for offering greater depth and conceptual integrity in curriculum content.

### ***Refine our definition of developmentally appropriateness***

For the last 18 months, NAEYC has been collecting suggestions for proposed revisions to the position statements on developmentally appropriate practice. Not surprisingly, some aficionados of Reggio Emilia have been among the more vocal critics. The content questions they raise are similar to the points emphasized by Malaguzzi (pp. 9–12): Does the current statement overemphasize the individual child and inadequately attend to the sociocultural context? Does emphasizing the Piagetian perspective of construction of knowledge neglect the

Vygotskian view of social construction? Does the child-centeredness of the document neglect the roles of teachers and parents? Perhaps more challenging is the format question raised by admirers of Reggio: Does the juxtaposition of appropriate and inappropriate practices in such definitive language interfere with encouraging reflection by teachers?

One thing that is comparable between DAP and Reggio Emilia is that neither constitutes a model. Each is a set of principles, a framework, an approach that cannot provide a recipe for what is appropriate for any given child in any situation. Both approaches emphasize the need to pay attention to the context of children's lives to determine what is appropriate in relation to children's development. While certain common elements need to be in place in each approach, specific practices will always vary.

As with all NAEYC position statements, the developmentally appropriate practice document is meant to be dynamic, changing as new knowledge is acquired. The questions listed here and many other issues will be carefully considered as NAEYC undertakes the process of updating and revising these important documents. The challenge, of course, is to refine, clarify, and update our definition of developmental appropriateness to minimize misinterpretations and reflect current knowledge without losing the power of the documents to transform practice for children. (Written comment is welcome and should be sent to Sue Bredekamp at NAEYC headquarters.)

### ***Balance standard setting with questioning***

The challenge confronting the revision process for DAP relates to all of NAEYC's standard-setting

work. In the past decade NAEYC has played an important role in setting standards for early childhood practice and professional development, including accreditation criteria, guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice, curriculum and assessment, compensation, and teacher education. Standards are, of necessity, relatively conservative documents; they must reflect not only research and theory but also the consensus of those to whom they are applied. Keeping standards on the cutting edge can be a painful process. At the same time, standard setting is an essential function of professional organizations, especially in their educational and advocacy roles.

Reggio educators, starting with Malaguzzi, express hesitation over writing down the principles of their approach because they so highly value questioning, reflection, research, and adaptation. Justifiably, they fear that written descriptions will be taken as prescriptions, and such an outcome would be antithetical to their philosophy.

So NAEYC faces the challenge of continuing to set standards that may become dated as soon as they survive the cumbersome consensus-building process, while also encouraging and promoting expansion of the knowledge base through continual questioning and reflection. Standard setting and questioning are each important professional functions; however, they are not interchangeable functions. Standards are action-directing statements; they serve the vital function of protecting children from harm and promoting their welfare. Questioning is essential for growth and change and expansion of knowledge. An organization such as NAEYC is bound by its mission: "to act on behalf of children." This action is primarily accomplished through standard setting, while the other activities of

the Association—for example, the journal, the conference, and publications—provide ample opportunities for questioning and reflecting on practice, research, and theory.

### ***Reflect on professional development***

Visitors to Reggio are often startled to learn that the teachers come to their jobs with minimal



***Four-year-old children discover the workings of a scale and the wonders of solving problems about volume and weight.***

preservice education, yet they acquire deep levels of understanding and become excellent teachers primarily through ongoing staff development opportunities on-the-job. Several aspects of the organizational structure support professional development, such as two co-teachers staying with a group for three years, a highly knowledgeable pedagoga for every six or seven schools, the presence of the atelierista, and the time set aside each week for meetings and reflection on practice. The emphasis on collaboration and documentation provide powerful opportunities for continual professional development. Teachers learn about child development, as well as individual children, by documenting the learning process through observation,

transcriptions of audiotapes, videotapes, photographs, slides, and other media, and by reflection with other staff members. In addition, Reggio teachers are expected to educate themselves widely beyond their own professional literature and are encouraged to read in other disciplines and interact with professionals from other fields.

Given the realities of the early childhood profession, in which requiring a great deal of preservice education prior to employment is both unfeasible and perhaps undesirable, the Reggio approach holds great promise but also great challenge. Achieving reflective practitioners may require changing the way “training” is delivered—from the outside consultant approach to on-site, sustained examination of practice among colleagues with the assistance of an educa-

tional coordinator, whose role is to engage directly with children as well as to support teachers’ development. A similar strategy—and even a similar structure—could be devised for the family child care community. These and other ideas will continue to be explored by NAEYC’s National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development.

### ***Expand our understanding of the roles of the teacher***

Attention to the professional development of early childhood teachers requires that we first have a clear understanding of what the teacher is supposed to know and be able to do. Unfortunately the early childhood literature is historically vague on this subject,

frequently oversimplifying the teacher’s role to a dichotomy between teacher-directed and child-initiated learning. The reality is far more complex and far more interesting. Here again we can gain valuable insights from studying the Reggio Emilia educators. The roles of the teacher are discussed in Reggio, again as part of an integrated conceptualization of the educational system; the teacher’s role derives from and cannot be separated from the image of the child, the nature of the learning process, relationships with parents, and the other fundamentals of the approach. Among the concepts encompassed in a discussion of the roles of the teacher are relationship, reciprocity, co-construction, research, collaboration, partnership, observation (in the active sense), and documentation. Each of these concepts is interpreted in ways that are both similar to and different from the English translations of the terms, as is seen in Malaguzzi’s discussion of relationships (pp. 9–12).

Outside observers sometimes assume that the symbolic representations produced by children individually and in groups in Reggio Emilia are the work of adults. In fact, several observers of Reggio reported to me privately that they saw teachers “doing” artwork for children in ways that Americans consider intrusive. During my visit to Reggio, I observed an adult twisting a wire for a child during the construction of a sculpture of the solar system, and I asked the group of teachers about this. Their answer—which involved two teachers, the pedagoga, and the atelierista—lasted 45 minutes and explained in great detail how the adult is inside the learning situation with the children, can give technical information or assistance that is useful, must learn how to wait and re-

main open to uncertainty, supports children's revisiting of experiences and learning, and can intervene and support children to do things that are beyond their current capacity. The educators explained that both the child and the teacher bring knowledge and competence to the situation that are equally important but different; the difficult task is to not give greater importance to adult knowledge.

I also observed a five-year-old girl working carefully on a drawing of herself dancing—assisted by stop-action images of herself on videotape. These and other experiences with Reggio educators led me to question how we can do a better job of helping teachers support children in the children's process of thinking and problem solving without intruding on the process. The answer seems to lie in the need to spend a great deal more time exploring the complex

roles of the teacher through direct experience in classrooms.

The six challenges discussed above constitute initial reflections and personal challenges that will undoubtedly be expanded and refined through continued discussion with colleagues and study of children and teachers. The exciting part of choosing early childhood education as a profession is the opportunity to continue to learn and develop; in good early childhood programs all over the world, teachers teach but they also learn, and children learn but they also teach. Our intention in presenting these articles to readers of *Young Children* is not simply to provide information or report conclusions but to stimulate thinking and interaction among early childhood professionals in America in collaboration with our colleagues in Italy.

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## Special Book Review Feature

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***The Hundred Languages of Children.*** Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman, Eds. 1993. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. 324 pp. \$24.95 paper.

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### Carol Brunson Phillips

This edited volume presents a thorough overview of the educational philosophy and practices of the city-run early childhood program of Reggio Emilia, Italy. It deserves careful reading, for it dispels the prevailing view of Reggio as an art-education curricu-

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lum and casts it as a comprehensive child development program. In doing so, the material recollects for the reader much of the basic philosophy undergirding our best practices here in the United States yet at the same time pushes us toward new considerations in our work with children and families. Most notably, the Italian ideas stimulate afresh reflections about the social construction of knowledge and the important con-

cepts that Piaget and Vygotsky have helped us recognize. The Italian ideas also remind us that the role of the preschool is complex, as is the role of "teacher."

*The Hundred Languages of Children* is especially well edited—its organizational format and chapter integration build a systematic and logical understanding as well as an affective feel for Reggio Emilia's schools. Its four parts, preceded by a foreword and remarks and followed by a conclusion, set the tone for a comfortable, stimulating thought journey.

To start, we are introduced to the schools through description by the editors and through analysis by Lilian Katz, who finds that we can learn six lessons from Reggio. The next section, Part II, provides a view of the work at Reggio in the words of the Italians themselves. It opens with a fascinating and rare (in English trans-