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Examining the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education

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Reggio Emilia, a prosperous region in Northern Italy, is the site of one of the most innovative, high-quality city-run infant-toddler and pre-primary systems in the world. The Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education draws from the ideas of many great thinkers, yet it is much more than an eclectic mix of theories. With that in mind, the following points concerning the learner, the instructor, and knowledge serve to guide the Reggio Emilia Approach to educating young children: the learner possesses rights, is an active constructor of knowledge, and is a social being; the instructor is a collaborator and co-learner along with the child, a guide and facilitator, and a researcher; and knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed, encompassing multiple forms of knowing, and comprised of meaningful wholes.

KEY WORDS: curriculum; early childhood education; Italy; Reggio Emilia.

INTRODUCTION

Reggio Emilia, a prosperous region in Northern Italy, is the site of one of the most innovative, high-quality, city-run infant-toddler and pre-primary systems in the world (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; New, 1990). Italy's nationwide dedication to the welfare and development of its children is evidenced by a 1968 national law instituting funding of public preschools for all children ages three to six years (Gandini, 1993; New, 1990; Walsh & Albrecht, 1996). Since the end of World War II, however, well before the establishment of this national law, the city of Reggio Emilia has been developing an educational system for young children through the collaborative efforts of parents, teachers, and the general community, under the guiding influence of Loris Malaguzzi (Gandini, 1994; Malaguzzi, 1993b; New, 1990).

As part of the city's post-war reconstruction, the first school for young children in Reggio Emilia was built literally by the hands of parents using proceeds gained from the sale of a war tank, three trucks, and six horses left behind by retreating Germans (Gandini, 1993; Malaguzzi, 1993b; Walsh & Albrecht, 1996). The essential role and intimate involvement of parents in their children's education is, to this day, a fundamental element of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Today, the city of Reggio Emilia finances and runs 22 schools for children ages 3 to 6 years, as well as 13 infant-toddler centers. Forty-seven percent and 35% of children from the two age groups are served, respectively (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Gandini, 1993; Gandini, 1994; New, 1990). "The schools in Reggio Emilia . . . have grown out of a culture that values children, out of the intense commitment of a group of parents, out of the leadership of a visionary man" (Neugebauer, 1994, p. 67).

Similar to how the Reggio Emilia Approach to educating young children values the "processes of 'unpacking' or defamiliarizing everyday objects and events" (Katz, 1993, p. 23), I intend to unpack the Reggio Emilia Approach by examining several of its key principles. In this article I will explore the Reggio Emilia Approach

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within the context of its theories regarding (a) the image and role of the learner, (b) the role of the instructor, and (c) the nature of the knowledge to be learned.

THE IMAGE AND ROLE OF THE LEARNER

The Child as Having Rights

Within the Reggio Emilia Approach, the fundamental belief on which the image of the child is constructed is that of the child having rights rather than simply needs (Malaguzzi, 1993a; 1993b; Rinaldi, 1993). According to Loris Malaguzzi (1993b), "If the children had legitimate rights, then they also should have opportunities to develop their intelligence and to be made ready for the success that would not, and should not, escape them" (p. 51). Influenced by this belief, the child is beheld as beautiful, powerful, competent, creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires (Malaguzzi, 1994; Rinaldi, 1993). Her nature, thoughts, and work are taken seriously and respected; therefore, the act of truly listening to the child is emphasized. This romantic view of the child is reminiscent of Friedrich Froebel's notion that a child possess a "divine essence" (Froebel, 1887, p. 4) in need of only cultivation and protection rather than interference.

The critical belief that the child possesses rights is the foundation on which the Reggio Emilia Approach is built. The eclectic blend of underlying theories which help to inform the Reggio Emilia Approach serves to support and expand this conviction.

The Child as an Active Constructor of Knowledge

The concept of the child having rights, and thereby possessing strength, competence, and potential, informs a view of the child as a protagonist, occupying the primary active role in her education and learning. As a protagonist, the child is understood as having an innate desire to discover, learn, and make sense of the world. Thus, within the Reggio Emilia Approach, the child is viewed not as a target of instruction, but rather as having the active role of an apprentice (Katz, 1993), working alongside others in the discovery and construction of solutions to meaningful questions and problems; learning is not something that is done to the child, but rather something she does (Firlik, 1994). Loris Malaguzzi (1994) summed up this idea when he eloquently described children as being "authors of their own learning" (p. 55).

This focus on "active education" (Malaguzzi, 1993b, p. 53) is influenced greatly by Jean Piaget's writings on constructivism in which he examined how children's active, physical interactions with the environment aid in their construction of knowledge (Malaguzzi, 1993b; Rankin, 1997). According to Piaget (1973), "A student who achieves a certain knowledge through free investigation and spontaneous effort will later be able to retain it" (p. 93).

The Child as a Researcher

Piaget's (1973) reference to children's "investigation" (p. 93) suggests the role of the child as that of a researcher. John Dewey (1966), also one of many theorists from which the Reggio Emilia Approach draws, more plainly stated, "All thinking is research" (p. 148). This idea is consistent with the image and role of the child within the Reggio Emilia schools. "They [children] are natural researchers as they question what they see, hypothesize solutions, predict outcomes, experiment, and reflect on their discoveries" (Staley, 1998, p. 20).

Within the Reggio Emilia Approach, the role of the child as researcher takes place within the context of projects, or "in-depth stud[ies] of a particular topic that one or more children undertake" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 2), the primary form of instruction and learning in Reggio Emilia schools. While engaging in a project, children have the opportunity to explore, observe, question, discuss, hypothesize, represent, and then proceed to revisit their initial observations and hypotheses in order to further refine and clarify their understandings, thereby expanding the richness of their thinking (Forman, 1996), and further defining their role as that of a researcher.

The Child as a Social Being

Although the Reggio Emilia Approach draws from Piaget's ideas, it also has sought to expand and overturn many of his theories (Malaguzzi, 1993b; Rankin, 1997). According to Malaguzzi (1993a), "[the Reggio Emilia Approach] has gone beyond Piagetian views of the child as constructing knowledge from within, almost in isolation" (p. 10). Rather, it places a strong emphasis on children's social construction of knowledge through their relationships (Malaguzzi, 1993a) within the context of collaboration, dialogue, conflict, negotiation, and cooperation with peers and adults (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1993; Gandini, 1993b).

Within Reggio Emilia schools it is believed that "only as children articulate to others that which they believe to be true do they come face-to-face with errors in their thinking" (Staley, 1998, p. 21). This emphasis on communication and language in learning may be found in the writings of Lev Vygotsky, whose theories have also greatly influenced the development of the Reggio Emilia Approach. Referring to Vygotsky's ideas con-

cerning language, Malaguzzi (1993b) stated, "[Vygotsky] reminds us how thought and language are operative together to form ideas and to make a plan for action" (p. 79). Children's communication through language, any of "the hundred languages of children" (Edwards, et al., 1993, p. 6), is considered essential to bringing meaning to knowledge within the Reggio Emilia Approach.

THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

The Teacher as a Collaborator and Co-Learner

Inasmuch as the child within the Reggio Emilia school is viewed as an active and competent protagonist in her learning, the teacher consequently takes on the role of collaborator and co-learner (Edwards, 1993; Gandini, 1997; Rankin, 1992). "In fact, teachers consider themselves to be partners in this process of learning . . . " (Gandini, 1997, p. 19). Reciprocal exchanges between children and adults throughout the course of constructing knowledge are valued and fostered. The idea that instruction travels in a two-way direction through the collaboration between children and adults is illustrated in Loris Malaguzzi's (1993b) metaphoric description of a Ping-Pong match. Both players, adult and child, are required to make appropriate adjustments in order to allow for and advance optimal growth and learning. A single player would be unable to participate successfully in the game.

The role of the teacher as partner and co-learner is most clearly demonstrated as both child and teacher engage in collaborative learning during the process of working through a project. " . . . Reggio's overarching educational principle of reciprocity appears again and again as teacher and learner together guide the project" (Rankin, 1992, p. 30). The teacher does not control nor dominate the child or her learning, but rather, demonstrates respect for the child's rights through mutual participation and joint action.

The role of the teacher as collaborator is not understood in respect solely to his relationship with the child, as the teacher's collaborative efforts with colleagues and parents are also considered vital (Albrecht, 1996; Malaguzzi, 1993a). "Our proposition is to consider a triad at the center of education—children, teachers, and families" (Malaguzzi, 1993a, p. 9). Collaboration, from all angles, is a cornerstone of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

The Teacher as a Guide and Facilitator

Although the teacher is a partner with the child in the process of learning, he also serves as guide and facilitator. According to Carolyn Edwards (1993), the teacher's role "centers on provoking occasions of discovery through a kind of alert, inspired facilitation and stimulation of children's dialogue, co-action, and co-construction of knowledge" (p. 154). Within this role, the teacher does not sit back and simply observe a child construct her own knowledge, although at times he may if appropriate; rather, he plays an active role in providing the child with the provocations and tools necessary to achieve her personal goals and advance her mental functioning.

There is a fine line, however, between "provoking occasions of discovery" (Edwards, 1993, p. 154) and imposing ideas. As a partner to the child, the teacher is "inside the learning situation" (Bredekamp, 1993, p. 16) and, therefore, attuned to the child's thought development, goals, and levels of ability and understanding. This insight provides him with the opportunity to ask questions, offer suggestions, or provide information and technical assistance without taking over the learning experience.

The role of the teacher as guide and facilitator is consistent with Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), within which adults provide scaffolding to assist children in their learning and consequent development (Diaz, Neal, & Amaya-Williams, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Referring to the Reggio Emilia Approach, Malaguzzi (1993b) offered a similar description: "We seek a situation in which the child is about to see what the adult already sees. . . . In such a situation, the adult can and must loan to the children his judgement and knowledge" (p. 80).

The Teacher as a Researcher

The teacher's role of facilitating children's learning according to their interests, questions, curiosity, and current understandings necessitates that he also take on the role of researcher (Edwards, 1993; Malaguzzi, 1994). Through observing and listening to the children, following-up with the collection and analysis of data, the teacher is able to ascertain critical knowledge concerning the children's development and learning, as well as their interests and curiosities, thereby enabling him to "produce strategies that favor children's work or can be utilized by them" (Malaguzzi, 1993b, p. 82).

Connected to the teacher's role of researcher is the substantial component of documentation. As teachers conduct their research they compile a large amount of

data including, but not limited to, photographs of the children engaged in learning endeavors, children's artwork in various stages of completion, videos, and transcribed audio recordings of the children's conversations as they engage in collaboration and reciprocal dialogue with peers and adults. In addition to analyzing the data through careful reflection and extensive discussion, the teachers prepare and display them on beautifully arranged panels (Edwards, et al., 1993; Gandini, 1993b). This meticulous documentation of the process and results of children's work serves three primary functions: (1) provides the children with a visual "memory" of what they have done and, thereby encourages a revisiting and expanding of old ideas, or the inspiration and development of new ideas; (2) provides teachers with a tool for research in order to assist them in continuing to improve and expand project ideas, better understand children, and evaluate their own work; and (3) is a way to provide parents with detailed information about what happens in the school and hopefully facilitate their input and involvement in present and future projects (Edwards, et al., 1993; Edwards & Springate, 1993; Gandini, 1993a; Katz & Chard, 1997; Staley, 1998).

The Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

In order for a teacher within a Reggio Emilia school to successfully carry out his complex role, it is important that he engage in continuous reflection during which he questions that which he and others have previously assumed to be unquestionable (Filippini, 1993; McCarthy, 1995). Just as the schools in Reggio Emilia have, and will continue to, constantly evolve, so too must the teacher.

This notion of intense reflection advocates Maxine Greene's idea that rather than blindly accepting handed-down slogans and beliefs, teachers must participate in the act of "do[ing] philosophy . . . [in which they] become critically conscious of what is involved in the complex business of teaching and learning" (Greene, 1973, p. 7). According to the social constructivist-influenced philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Approach, this reflection and questioning on the part of the teacher must take place within the context of discussion and collaboration with colleagues, parents, experts within the community, and yes, even the children (Filippini, 1993; Malaguzzi, 1993a).

THE NATURE OF THE KNOWLEDGE TO BE LEARNED

Knowledge as Socially Constructed

Within the Reggio Emilia Approach knowledge is viewed not as a static list of skills and facts to be transmitted from adult to child, as, according to Rinaldi (1993), "the potential of children is stunted when the endpoint of their learning is formulated in advance" (p. 104). Rather, knowledge is perceived as dynamic in that it is constructed within the context of the child-child and child-adult relationships (Malaguzzi, 1993a; Rinaldi, 1993). Communication and the sharing of ideas is believed to bring meaning to knowledge and, in turn, understandings may vary according to the individuals, the group, and the social context.

Social relationships, and the construction of knowledge within, often involve debate, discord, and conflict. In some cultures these emotions are frequently avoided and discouraged, however, in Reggio Emilia conflict is desired and valued as a means to advance higher-level thinking. According to Loris Malaguzzi (1993a), "Even when cognitive conflicts do not produce immediate cognitive growth, they can be advantageous because by producing cognitive dissonance, they can in time produce progress" (p. 12). This idea is clearly influenced by Piaget's (1973) theory outlining the value of cognitive conflict and disequalibrium as means to higher mental functioning.

Multiple Forms of Knowing

Since knowledge is perceived within the Reggio Emilia Approach as socially constructed and, thereby, dynamic, it follows that no ultimate truth may be understood to exist, but rather multiple forms of knowing. This notion is consistent with the constructivist view of knowledge. According to Fosnot (1996), "We as human beings have no access to an objective reality since we are constructing our version of it, while at the same time transforming it and ourselves" (p. 23). Consequently, within the schools of Reggio Emilia, the goal is not to pass information along or replicate thinking, but rather to advance thinking.

Within the Reggio Emilia schools there are no planned curriculums or standards indicating what is to be learned (Malaguzzi, 1993b; Rinaldi, 1993), as "these would push our schools towards teaching without learning" (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 8). Rather, it is up to the children, in collaboration with teachers and one another, to determine the course of their investigations and learning (Malaguzzi, 1993b).

Just as there are multiple forms of knowing, so too are there multiple ways of expressing, demonstrating, and interpreting knowledge. Within the Reggio Emilia Approach children are encouraged and facilitated as they represent their plans, ideas, and understandings using one or more "languages, or modes of expression" (Edwards, et al., 1993, p. 3) including, but not limited to, sculpture, drawing, painting, dance, drama, writing, and

puppetry (New, 1990). In fact, this act in itself is valued as contributing to the advancement of knowledge. "As children compare these various representations, they confront new possibilities and generate new questions that would not have occurred had they used only one medium" (Forman, 1996, p. 172); meaning is enhanced and expanded. Therefore, the use of various expressions of knowledge may be understood as assisting to create and continually unfold multiple forms of knowing.

Knowledge as Whole

While constructing their own knowledge and achieving understanding within the context of reciprocal relationships with peers, teachers, and parents, children within the schools of Reggio Emilia create important connections for themselves. "In Reggio the process of learning involves making connections and relationships between feelings, ideas, words, and actions" (LeeKeenan & Nimmo, 1995, p. 262). Through the course of making these connections, and guided by the belief that learning is a spiraling process in which ideas, opinions, and thoughts must be expressed, revisited, reflected upon, and expressed again, children consolidate their ideas, thoughts, and feelings into meaningful and cohesive wholes.

This view of learning and knowledge is consistent with the Gestalt approach in which the world is believed to be experienced in "meaningful patterns or organized wholes" (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 35). Understanding the world through the detailed examination of isolated bits of information succeeds only in altering the whole and, thereby contravenes true understanding and higher level thinking.

Children's effort to make meaning and create connections is again facilitated by the project-approach utilized within the schools of Reggio Emilia (Katz, 1993). Within the context of projects, "young children learn through meaningful activities in which different subject areas are integrated" (Edwards & Springate, 1995, p. 27). Children are provided opportunities and support as they discover interrelationships, connections, and underlying principles while following their interests and ideas and engaging in authentic tasks.

It is important to note, however, that even though the making of connections in the process of comprehending the whole is of utmost importance within the schools of Reggio Emilia, specific skills and understandings are not neglected; although, they are understood as needing to remain within the context of meaningful activities. According to Malaguzzi (1993b),

> We . . . [are] convinced that it is not an imposition on children or an artificial exercise to work with numbers, quantity, classification, dimensions, forms, measurement, transformation, orientation, conservation and change, or speed and space, because these explorations belong spontaneously to the everyday experiences of living, playing, negotiating, thinking, and speaking by children. (p. 45)

CONCLUSION

The Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education draws from the ideas and theories of many great thinkers—including and beyond those referred to within this article. Yet, the fundamental philosophy serving to guide this approach is much more than an eclectic mix of theories. The ideas from which it draws have, for over 30 years, been reflected upon, expanded, and adapted within the context of the unique culture of Reggio Emilia, Italy, thus resulting in the creation of a singular, cohesive theory.

The Reggio Emilia Approach to educating young children is strongly influenced by a unique image of the child and deeply embedded within the surrounding culture. It is not a model nor recipe with a set of guidelines and procedures to be followed, therefore, one cannot and should not attempt to simply import it to another location. Rather, it must be carefully uncovered and redefined according to one's own culture in order to successfully affect practice elsewhere.

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