

Unpacking My Questions and Images: Personal Reflections on Reggio Emilia

by Bonnie Neugebauer

I thought I was taking a trip, but I was beginning a journey. I knew I would be impressed, but I was filled with delight and wonder. I returned home, but my mind keeps traveling. When I visited the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, I expected to learn about an exemplary educational system, but I am beginning to glimpse a different way of living. These reflections guide my journey.

I thought I left home with an open mind, a supply of film, and plenty of pencils. But I wasn't prepared. I have visited wonderful programs for young children across the United States, and I didn't want to forget that. As we began listening and visiting, people would ask, "Isn't this wonderful?" "Can you believe it?" "Do you get it?" I would respond with a verbal "Yes" and a mental "but. . . ."

I had carefully secured the doorstep in my mind, a secure (or so I thought) place from which to hold on to my reservations. I did not want to be blown out of my comfort zone. But as conversations and days passed, the flood of impressions and ideas not only moved the doorstep; they tore the door from its hinges.

The schools in Reggio Emilia are **wonderful** places for children and adults to spend their days, working and learning together. They 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. They have a long history; they have evolved over time. These schools are rooted in the culture that created them.

It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for us to try to replicate the Reggio schools in the United States. But it would be foolish to miss or reject the opportunity to learn from them. Whether we study what they have done intensely or whether we visit Italy briefly or attend their seminars here, or whether we read about what they are doing, each of these experiences is an opportunity to change, to look at what we are doing, and to work and live more thoughtfully.

With Children as the Focus

There is much discussion centered around the image of the child in Reggio Emilia. This image is the reference point from which all teaching and learning begin and to which they always return. There is great respect for the child as learner, sensitivity for the individual nature of learning, and support for learning in community.

This is a place where children come first. They don't come first after budget constraints or staffing issues or anything else. They simply, and significantly, come first. Everything centers around them and evolves through them. They are the focus of all that happens. You not only see and hear this message as you enter the schools, you feel it, even taste it. This is their place, a place that bears the stamp of their individual personalities, their learning experiences, and their own particular community at work. The presence and work of children permeates the space.

This is a place where children are powerful. This space belongs to them, they can create and recreate.

It is organized for their inspiration and control. Not only do the children understand how to move through their environment, but they see everywhere a history, a record of what has already happened. What they do impacts the environment. Displays and descriptions of their work help children to figure out where they are going with their learning and where they have been; they emphasize the importance of what children are doing.

There is great attention to detail — in the environment, in display, in recording. As adults talk about the children's learning, they never say "a boy," or "one child." It is always, "When Antonio . . ." or "Gina was talking. . . ." Great attention is given to observing, describing, and recording with accuracy and thoroughness.

There is time to enjoy the process of learning. There is time to experiment, to make mistakes and readjustments, to laugh, and to complete a task to satisfaction. There is also time to return to a task to reexamine and experience growth.

Two boys are placing yellow and white checkered tablecloths on narrow tables for lunch. As they step back to examine their efforts, they laugh together. They straighten the cloth and look again. Still unsatisfied, they make more adjustments. Their teacher stops to watch. She directs their attention to the overhang, and suddenly they realize that placing the length of the cloth across the width of the table just doesn't work — they all laugh. And the boys return to their task.

Nearby, other children are setting the tables with real crockery, glasses, and complete sets of cutlery. They spend over an hour setting all the tables for lunch.

Teachers seem to be on the alert for creating moments/opportunities that will surprise or delight the children. There is a sense of excitement. This is a place where surprises can happen and an unplanned, unbidden event can change the course of the day: *Wouldn't it be perfect if a zebra came frolicking through the field of poppies? Should a stork appear during the celebration? Wouldn't a potato masher make a wonderful wolf puppet as counterpart to the potato grandmother?*

Behold the Child at My Side

The child is learning about him or herself, about others, about the world. The adults are engaged in

learning about the children. This is their vocation, perhaps their avocation.

Adults sit at tables, hover over light tables, move as the needs of the children dictate. They are watching and listening, recording; they are engaged in learning about the learning of the children. And the children see all this. The fact that they are being observed as they work, that adults are so interested in what they are doing, that what they are doing is of such great significance that it is being recorded, all send a powerful message to these children.

And the teachers are talking with the children: "Bellissimo." "Bene, bene!" They ask questions, seeking to understand what is happening for the child during this learning experience. They are involved with the children. They are on the child's level, involved in the child's task, working to understand the child's thinking. And with photos and tapes and pens, they are preserving a record of this process for later discussion to further their own learning.

Teachers are fully engaged *with* the child in the process of learning. They are *with* the child as an idea develops, a project takes shape, a discovery unfolds. Their delight in the ah-hah of the moment of discovery is as new as that of the child. They are not *in front* of the child, leading the way, thinking ahead to tomorrow's lessons. They are not *following* the child, frantically transcribing a history. They are not *by* or *near* or *beside* or *next to* or *close to*; the relationship is not parallel. The engagement is *with*.

The learning is not directed at solutions, formulas, answers, but at more questions, more possibilities to explore. Children are learning to think; they are supported in observing the power of their own ideas.

A Community of Learners

The children and teachers and parents develop a very real sense of community during their work together. All are invested in the process of learning.

Many of the projects and much of the artwork created at the schools in Reggio Emilia are group efforts. A large piece of work, displayed for all to enjoy, is often composed of the smaller, individual works of each child. Children contribute to the formation of the project, work individually and in groups, and share in the accomplishment of the result. Within this

context the sense of community develops and the very social nature of life and work is grounded in a group identity.

Moments of discovery immediately become opportunities to share. Interactions are continual and the air hums with conversations punctuated by joyous ah-hahs!

Teachers work as a collaborative group. They share with each other during extensive planning. Each contributor is equal, each comes to the effort with a real sense of cooperation. Problems/risks/errors are all worked on together; no one struggles on alone. What evolves benefits from each person's contribution but bears the mark of the group.

And there is a love of conflict, of looking at things from different points of view and tangling with snarly issues, of arguing, sharing, talking. Difficulties are challenges.

Parents are invited into the learning situation in a variety of ways even before the child actually begins his first day. The displays of children's art — the gallery of written and visual information in the foyer, the panels on the walls that record the children's projects and learning — all draw parents into conversations with each other and into an awareness and growing interest in the life of the school. Involvement in specific activities with the children — making furniture and providing materials, serving on committees, participating in celebrations of projects — are also ways that parents share in what is happening.

So Much Beauty

A great deal of thinking and problem-solving has gone into figuring out what comprises a wonderful learning environment for children. This is not an environment where everything matches, where everything is shiny and new — this is an environment filled with unlimited opportunities for discovery. It is an environment that is created by the learning that goes on within its spaces and the learners, both child and adult, themselves.

It is beautiful in the way that a home is beautiful. It reflects the stories of the people who live within it and it evolves through a sensitivity to natural beauty — wood, sunlight, plants, colors, comfort. It feels like a studio, with plenty of light, comfortable places to sit

and work, well-organized materials, careful display of past projects, natural materials creating inspiration for future endeavors.

It appears at moments to be a magic place, full of wonder and beauty. But this environment is very complex. Great attention has been paid to details and to extending possibilities. Light is transformed by objects in its path — mobiles, transparent or translucent paintings, mirrors. It is turned into reflections and shadows and rainbows and distorted images.

And it transforms artwork, taking it to new dimensions. *What does this collage look like unilluminated, with light shining upon it, with light shining through it?* By moving her artwork, the child is able to change the world she sees both indoors and out.

Transparency is one of the words the educators in Reggio like to use. Spaces do not have definite boundaries; windows, short walls, dividers with open spaces, mirrors, mobiles, all carry our eye from one space to the next to the next. Just as learning is not divided and cordoned into categories — children go back to previous projects and learning to think again about these ideas. Things spiral and extend in Reggio Emilia. There is a sense of continuity and connectedness. This is an environment created by millions of questions and thoughts and ideas, carefully crafted out of an ongoing collaboration among all of the people invested here — parents, teachers, administrators, and, of course, children.

What Will I Do with All This Baggage?

There is so much that we can learn from the educators in Reggio Emilia. Some might challenge themselves to learn it all. Being less confident, or perhaps feeling less Italian, I just want to make sure that I use my images and ideas and all the upheaval they have created in my mind, starting with these resolutions:

- In every interaction with children to ask: "What am I saying about my image of this child?" (And then, of course, to reconcile this information with my preconceived images of the child.)
- To be more thoughtful about everything. Rather than looking for answers (endplaces), to focus on learning to ask good questions and doing the next

thing. To take pleasure in challenges and growth. To argue and risk more, and agree less.

- To work on improving observational skills. To try to separate what I thought I would see from what I am seeing.
- To know that we, too, can create places where children are absolutely first, and to work to create and support them.
- And to keep my images fresh in my mind to inspire and motivate the best in me.

Where this new learning will take us is unknown. It's a spiral, it's ongoing — it's tremendously exciting! And it's wonderful for our children.

*Bonnie Neugebauer, editor of **Child Care Information Exchange**, was part of the June 1993 delegation to Reggio Emilia, Italy.*