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# Reggio Emilia As Cultural Activity Theory in Practice

*This article situates Reggio Emilia's municipally funded early childhood program within the city's cultural traditions of resistance and collaboration and considers what it is about this highly localized program that is appealing and useful to contemporary school reform initiatives. Five features of Reggio Emilia's approach to early education are described: an interpretation of teachers as researchers, curriculum as long-term projects, the role of symbolic languages in child development and advocacy, the role of the environment, and an interpretation of parents as partners in the educational enterprise. Other features of the city's hard work—specifically, its capacity to make ideas visible and its emphasis on relations among adults as well as children—are identified as central to Reggio Emilia's continued influence on the field. The article concludes with a proposal to consider schools as sites where reform initiatives can be informed by principles and practices from Reggio Emilia.*

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## ***Oregono? Reggio What? And Who Is Emilia?***

OVER THE PAST 2 DECADES, the name of this Italian city has become, for many, the gold standard for quality early childhood education. Reggio Emilia, long associated with the famous cheese it produces with its neighbor Parma, is now a moniker for its equally famous municipal program for children ages 0 to 6. The words Reggio Emilia represent more, however, than a symbol of status and quality. Even as it has joined other name brand approaches to an early childhood curriculum (Montessori, Bank Street, High Scope), the nickname *Reggio* has become a catalyst for conversations about a society's responsibility to its youngest citizens. For some, the city's rapid rise to acclaim represents an unwelcome and increasingly globalized hegemony regarding children's early care and education. For others, the city's *servizi per l'infanzia* (early childhood services) highlight previously unimagined and rarely realized potentials of children and teachers to learn together, the rights of families to participate, and the responsibilities of a community to support such collaborative engagement. Beyond this, Reggio Emilia demonstrates the power of creative and critical thinking, especially when helped along by courage, charisma, and good timing.

For those unfamiliar with the city and its work, this issue serves as an invitation to join conversations that have been ongoing in the United States for the past 2 decades<sup>1</sup> about what Reggio Emilia has to offer to the theory and practice of early childhood education. For those already familiar with this Italian approach to early childhood education, there is more to contemplate; this special issue describes explorations of Reggio-Emilian principles and practices that have generated new insights into the means and meanings of collaborative inquiry and ethical praxis. This article begins by moving quickly beyond the celebrity status of Reggio Emilia's name to consider its epistemological origins and to ponder how it is that such highly particularized ideas could grow and develop in one setting and then be dispersed around the world where they have taken root and flourished in diverse but hospitable soils. The article concludes with some conjectures about how lessons from Reggio Emilia might inform our understanding of and improve our efforts at school reform.

### **Reggio Emilia: Small Town, Big Ideas**

The groundwork for what is now referred to as "the Reggio Emilia approach" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, 1998) is deeply rooted in the town's long history of resistance to social injustice and its alliance with Italy's socialist and communist parties (New, 1993). The more obvious origins can be traced back to a time shortly after World War II, when working parents claimed abandoned buildings and petitioned the city to help them build new schools for their young children. Wanting more than the traditional custodial care, parents found an eloquent spokesman in the form of Loris Malaguzzi, who was inspired by their strong sense of purpose and soon joined their efforts. Parents declared their desire for schools where children were taken seriously and where even the youngest could acquire the skills and values of collaboration and critical thinking necessary to a free and democratic society. Aided by Malaguzzi's vision of childhood as rich with unrealized potentials and building on collaborative traditions, Reggio Emilia opened the city's first mu-

nicipal preschool in 1963 and played a leadership role in the establishment, in 1968, of Italy's national system of early childhood services.

Over the next decade, as they worked closely with colleagues in other municipalities committed to public early childhood services, the *Reggiani* (citizens of Reggio Emilia) remained focused on their goal of creating a never-before-imagined environment for children. Inspired by a belief in the need to design a new kind of school for a new kind of future, Reggio Emilia citizens engaged in regular debates about the need for community-wide collaboration and innovation. The results of their efforts can be found in the qualities now associated with Reggio Emilia's approach to early childhood education. The quantity of services also expanded; by the late 1970s, more than a dozen municipally funded preschools as well as infant-toddler centers were scattered across the city. Today, Reggio Emilia has more than three dozen *scuole* (preprimary schools) and *nidi* (infant-toddler centers) serving approximately half the city's population of young children. It is no surprise to those familiar with the city that one of their schools would be selected as "the best in the world" ("The 10 Best Schools in the World," 1991). Even as most Italians decried the hyperbole, they also acknowledge Reggio Emilia's reputation of putting its best efforts into its initiatives. As pointedly noted by a school administrator in the neighbor city of Parma, the citizens of Reggio Emilia can be remarkably persistent—*sono proprio tosti!* ("they are really stubborn!")—when they come up with what they consider a good idea. Reggio Emilia had more than one good idea, and they wanted to share their understandings with others.

Of the many features of Reggio Emilia's work that have attracted attention and challenged contemporary interpretations of early childhood education, five are central to their success. The following brief description situates these characteristics within their Italian context and highlights their affinity to central tenets of sociocultural activity theory: the concept of teachers as learners, *progettazione* (long-term project work) as a curriculum vehicle, children's multiple symbolic languages as culturally constructed modes of discourse, the physical environment as a develop-

mental niche, and parental involvement as a form of civic engagement.

### Teachers As Learners

The 1968 Italian law proclaiming preschool as a right for 3- to 5-year-old children also described these environments as “laboratories for teachers.” In part due to the absence of any preservice teacher education for teachers of young children in Italy,<sup>2</sup> this notion of schools as learning environments for adults was translated by Reggio Emilia into a form of professional development inextricable from other key elements of their early childhood services. Throughout the early period of program evolution, Reggio Emilian teachers explored the ideas of American philosophers Dewey and Hawkins, among others, as they contributed to a pedagogy of collaborative inquiry involving children as well as adults. Along with colleagues in other Italian cities, educators in Reggio Emilia have since explored Italian traditions of documentation and *discussione* (conversations characterized by debate and negotiation)—in which teachers observe, record, share, analyze, and debate their emerging understandings of children’s ways of thinking and learning and then share these understandings with others. This combination of philosophically and practically derived understandings of epistemology represents a highly particularized invention of teaching (Davis, 2004) that can be traced back to Socratic traditions of doubt and inquiry.

### Pedagogy of Collaborative Inquiry—For Children and Adults

Malaguzzi was outspoken in his belief that traditional Italian early childhood programs failed to recognize, much less support, children’s social and intellectual competencies. The need to learn more about children so as to better teach them resulted in a pedagogical approach to curriculum that includes teacher curiosities as well as those expressed by children themselves within the context of long-term open-ended projects or *progettazione*. Although the starting point of such a problem-based curriculum varies, many begin

with children’s efforts to understand something about the physical or social worlds (“How does the fountain work?”), address a practical proposition (“Let’s make a water wheel!”), or explore a philosophical dilemma (“Can an enemy become a friend?”). As hypotheses are posed, teachers create conditions in which children can explore and test those ideas, and frame new hypotheses. As a way of keeping everyone, adults as well as children, alert to the processes and discoveries of this sort of learning experience, teachers document—that is, they collect and analyze extensive data, including artifacts of children’s work, transcripts of conversations, and images of children’s activities. Such an integration of curriculum content and pedagogical inquiry illustrates the Vygotskian principle that learning leads development, and highlights the potentials of conditions in which children engage in problem solving “under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). To those who marvel at the sophisticated understandings children demonstrate in their project work, it is clear that the cultural activity of *progettazione* functions as a zone of proximal development where “children grow into the intellectual life of those around them and develop the culturally organized psychological functions” of importance to their sociocultural context (Mistry, 2007).

### Symbolic Forms of Knowledge Representation

To support teachers’ efforts to learn about the children’s ways of thinking, *atelieriste* (artists) were hired to provide alternative perspectives on children’s creative and communicative potentials. These artists-in-residence developed unconventional partnerships with classroom teachers, and, with the support of new laboratory spaces known as *atelier*, worked together to promote children’s developing ability to symbolically represent their ideas with clay, constructions, drawings, and paintings. *Atelieriste* made sure that children had both the tools and the need to communicate their understandings through various media. Over time these symbolic representations, typically regarded as art activities, were reconceptualized by

Malaguzzi as among the “hundred languages of children.” As teachers collected and contemplated transcripts of children’s conversations and detailed renderings of their developing understandings, they, too, began to refine their own form of symbolic representation. Their elegant and compelling forms of documentation represent their understandings about children’s learning, their questions about their own teaching, and their advocacy for more sincere and reciprocal adult–adult and adult–child conversations. The use of images, text, and samples of children’s work illustrate and expand on Vygotskian notions of the role of language in cognition. Over time, documentation became integral to classroom life, illustrating the principle that culturally constructed ways of life (eventually) depend on “shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation” (Bruner, 1990, p. 13).

### **The Physical Environment**

Few fail to notice the aesthetic sensibility that permeates the Italian culture, whether in the colorful array of vegetables in the market, the carefully pressed jeans of even the most casually dressed teenager, or the importance of design and detail evident in Italian homes and businesses. This attention to ambience and the importance of *bella figura* (putting one’s best self forward) is perhaps the most obvious and provocative feature of classrooms in Reggio Emilia. Teachers want the children to learn to notice and appreciate colors, textures, and design. They also want them to make friends, they want parents to feel welcome, and they want an environment that supports their own relational, aesthetic, and intellectual needs as well. Teachers also have advocacy goals in mind, so that anyone who enters these environments for young children will recognize that something of importance and value is going on. Thus the classrooms and hallways in Reggio Emilia’s municipal programs for young children are sparkling clean, with a palpable absence of clutter. Far from sterile, plants and natural light are in abundance, as are displays of found objects, whether rose petals or colored stones, presented in ways to draw attention to their common and distinct features. Adult

furniture as well as reading material are available for parents who decide to stay for a while. Documentation of children’s ongoing and prior work is ample, revealing the rich nature of the learning environment and reminding viewers that each school has its own history. Holes in walls invite children to peek through and find their friends or make new ones. Dress-up clothes are housed in a central space so children from different classrooms can assist with buttons and zippers and play together. Reggio Emilia teachers describe the environment as “a third teacher,” deserving of attention and respect. Teachers in Reggio Emilia have maximized the environment’s potential as a developmental niche where children acquire the skills and understandings that enable them to successfully participate in their cultural community (Super & Harkness, 1986).

### **Families and Citizens As Partners**

The philosophy of school as a system of relations is perhaps the least visible feature of Reggio Emilia’s early childhood program, and yet it is surely the foundation, both philosophically and practically, of its approach. The Italian emphasis on shared governance and long-standing traditions of collaboration among small businesses and farmers is fundamental to the daily operations of Reggio Emilia’s municipal *servizi del’infanzia*. The principle of collaboration is expressed in a myriad of ways, beginning with the insistence by teachers that they are not substitutes for parents, but rather, share with parents the challenge and responsibility of educating their children. This orientation to adult relations is more than a question of sharing responsibility; it is also an Italian interpretation of children as catalysts for adult relations (New & Mallory, 2005). It also expands on principles of attachment theory so that the child’s relationships with non-familial adults are mediated by those with whom she has an initial attachment (Bove, 1999).

### **Reggio Emilia as Catalyst for Reflection and New Relations**

This brief description serves as a primer for understanding what it is about Reggio Emilia that

others are so eager to learn. Given the cultural roots of what remains a highly localized program of services for Italian children and their families, it is worth considering how it is that Reggio Emilia's ideas and practices have been welcomed with such fervor in a society with an altogether different history, not to mention present day interpretation of early care and education. The next part of this article considers how it is that Reggio Emilia has managed to capture and retain the attention of early childhood educators, particularly in the United States, and what this Italian provocation might contribute to school reform initiatives in diverse sociocultural settings.

When U.S. early childhood educators first began to hear about Reggio Emilia in the late 1980s, they were immersed in a growing debate about the nature of early childhood as distinct from that of formal elementary schooling. Amid renewed interest in the "Project Approach" (Katz & Chard, 1989), Reggio Emilia's practices resonated with the premises and promise of progressive education. They also provided visible challenges to key theoretical premises of The National Association for the Education of Young Children's publication outlining guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987). In particular, examples from Reggio Emilia problematized a Piagetian interpretation of the child-as-solitary learner, and instead, demonstrated principles of socially constructed knowledge as children and teachers worked collaboratively on projects of their own making. It was within this context that the specially prepared English-language version of Reggio Emilia's traveling exhibition, "The Hundred Languages of Children," arrived in the United States. As developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) guidelines gained new advocates as well as critics (Mallory & New, 1994), the traveling exhibition and associated conferences put forth alternative views about an early childhood pedagogy—one that was fascinating and joyful as well as intellectually rich—for children as well as adults. That Reggio Emilia is now interspersed throughout the revised developmentally appropriate practice guidelines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) is testimony to the complex relationship between these two orientations, and to the power and

clarity of Reggio Emilia's message at a time when people were looking for guidance as well as inspiration.

It was not just early childhood educators who were thinking deeply about appropriate pedagogy for young children. In great part due to the growing body of brain research that reconfirmed the importance of the early years, the National Research Council responded with its own document on new understandings of how children learn (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). Reggio Emilia capitalized on this newly recognized importance assigned to the period of early childhood, expanding on its means of dissemination through increased delegations to Reggio Emilia, new English-language publications, and collaborative U.S.-based conferences, often linked to its traveling exhibition. The congruence of these initiatives was instrumental in establishing Reggio Emilia as something to be reckoned with, and word about Reggio Emilia spread. The news media was an increasingly willing participant, as evidenced by articles in such prestigious publications as *Newsweek* and *Education Week* and several PBS programs. Within this context, Reggio Emilia had much to offer to the discourse on the "what" and the "how" of an early childhood education.

Beyond its broad appeal, ample publicity, and resonance with contemporary issues, Reggio Emilian educators played a major role in the city's growing reputation—they did not just talk about their work; they demonstrated how and why they did what they did. They did not just promote the idea of relationships as indispensable to learning; they helped to create new partnerships and supportive environments for teachers and other adults.

### Seeing Is Believing

Surely the most obvious contribution to its global status is the city's willingness to go public with both the practical and ideological dimensions of their work. The ability to articulate and demonstrate "the what and the why" (New, 1998) of their work was expressed first through the exhibition and soon thereafter by the words and actions of the Italians themselves. Malaguzzi did not

mince words when he talked about his wish to change the culture of childhood. Not confident in the typical forms of scholarly dissemination, he convinced the city to support the creation of an enormous (100 meters long) exhibition to travel throughout Western Europe. The exhibition was hugely successful in attracting the attention of educators in other nations, notably Germany and Sweden, and in 1987 an English-language version arrived in the United States. The exhibition has since been translated into several other languages and has by now traveled across oceans to nations as diverse and distant as Australia, Brazil, and Japan.

This “making visible” occurred through other means as well, including experiences that were even more powerful and personal. The notion of study tours or delegations was a new experience for many teachers and academics. This firsthand approach to learning about another culture’s educational practices quickly caught on, and thousands of non-Italian educators have since seen for themselves “what all the talk is about.” These firsthand experiences in Reggio Emilia played a major role in convincing skeptics that activities and learning depicted in the exhibit and described in journal articles were, in fact, legitimate representations of ongoing classroom practices. The experiences of observing and discussing activities within the real-life contexts of the schools and classrooms gave some participants the confidence to come home and explore these new ideas and associated practices in their own settings. For those who wished to have more support in translating Reggio Emilia’s work into U.S. classrooms, the increased availability of master teachers from Italy also helped to make visible the processes of this work with children and adults. Not only did the new partnerships provide essential support for teachers attempting to rethink their roles in children’s early learning, they also demonstrated, by example, yet another feature that continues to play out in American discourse: the need to reconsider conditions for adult learning, and especially the powerful role of relationships in supporting the risk-taking essential to shifting paradigms, whether that risk entails allowing children to veer away from a predetermined curriculum

plan due to a new discovery of their own, or inviting parents into a more collaborative and reciprocal partnership

### **The Role of Relationships in Teaching and Learning**

Many of the ideas that Reggio Emilia educators demonstrated in their own classrooms and eventually brought to the United States were consistent with, or extensions of, previously held ideals of a progressive early childhood education. Although some of those ideals were dramatically elaborated on—particularly children’s newly realized competencies at their multiple symbolic languages—perhaps none carried as much eventual weight as the implicit message of what Reggio Emilia symbolized: a reconceptualization of an early childhood education that nurtures and challenges adults as well as children. Although the image of children has been what has most inspired U.S. educators, it is the image of teachers that has likely sustained their interest and commitment. At a time when teachers in the United States have become increasingly subject to critique and control, Reggio Emilia offers an entirely different vision of a professional early childhood educator—one with a deep respect for and curiosity about children, an unquenchable curiosity about the teaching–learning process, and a capacity for exploration and innovation that could be sustained through collaborative relationships with other adults. This image of the teacher has proven to be both enticing and challenging to American educators, many of whom have found permission, through Reggio Emilia’s example, to speak out against practices they view as contrary to children’s best interests. For those weary of the low esteem assigned to the work with young children, Reggio Emilia proposed a working environment responsive to their intelligence and creativity. For others, Reggio Emilia provided a new vocabulary with which to describe their work with children, and, in fact, phrases such as “the image of the child” and “children’s symbolic languages” are now part of the discourse and the thinking of many U.S. educators. For those tired of conflicts with children’s parents, Reggio Emilia offered a new

way of thinking about the home–school relationship (New & Mallory, 2005). Of all of the suggestions that Reggio Emilia has put forth to improve the working and learning conditions of teachers, the role of relationships embedded within the practice of collaborative inquiry has been the most profound.

### **Schools As Zones of Proximal Development**

The aims of this article have been twofold: (a) to describe Reggio Emilia and its municipal early childhood program as part of a particular cultural place, and (b) to examine the phenomenon of its transportability into other cultural settings as it might inform school reform agenda. Reggio Emilia has become known around the world primarily due to its accessibility and the visibility of its practices, its multiple methods of representing knowledge, and its advocacy for the often unrecognized and unrealized competencies of children. But there are other reasons why Reggio Emilia has inspired change in so many schools and teachers.

A vast majority of U.S. reform initiatives are based on opinions about what is wrong with schools, classrooms, teachers, children, and families. In contrast, Reggio Emilia portrays optimistic rather than deficit views of both the people and the potentials of educational institutions, and has capitalized on the sense of personal pride and responsibility associated with other Italian local initiatives in the design and operation of *servizi dell'infanzia*. Reggio Emilia's preschools and infant–toddler centers are guided by the principle of schools as “systems of relations,” in which the needs and interests of children and families are linked to and dependent on the needs and interests of teachers, parents, and community members. This principle is not only theoretically grounded; it is also politically savvy and surely attributes to the high level of fiscal and community support provided to the schools and teachers. Reggio Emilia is a living and breathing example of the Italian tradition of experimentation and innovation, and the benefits of hard work, courage, and

collaborative inquiry in constructing meaningful interpretations of a quality education (New, 2005). The city's commitment to its early childhood services also demonstrates the importance of public talk about schools and schooling (Fennimore, 2000). Indeed, Reggio Emilia's own story is all the more inspiring because it so clearly illustrates the reciprocal dynamics of conflict, social development, and cultural change—in schools and in society (Turiel, 1999).

These characteristics—a sense of optimism, pride, support, and an openness to experimentation and innovation—derive directly from the local features of Reggio Emilia's *servizi per l'infanzia* but respond to needs that know no cultural boundaries. Indeed, they are fundamental to inspired and inspiring learning environments. That so many teachers have found these qualities missing in their work environments is surely a major part of Reggio Emilia's attraction; this understanding offers new insights into conditions for educational reform initiatives. That so many educators have been inspired to engender these qualities in other settings around the world illustrates what it might mean to consider schools as zones of proximal development for adults as well as children. Such an interpretation of a zone is not in reference to a child's potential, or even the possibilities realized when a child and teacher work together, but rather, refers to a set of conditions represented by the larger sociocultural environment within which learning and development take place (Mistry, 2007). We have much to learn from environments beyond Reggio Emilia where people are responsive to current interests and emerging understandings, supportive of relationships and provocations, and characterized by collaborative activity—and many are described in the articles written by authors in this issue of *Theory Into Practice*. Whether a statewide project in Vermont, a citywide Head Start initiative in Chicago, or a laboratory school in New Hampshire, adults in these cultural environments have created and utilized what Vygotsky referred to as culturally constituted mediational means to accomplish goals particular to local circumstances.

The descriptions of learning and development in children—including those with special needs,

adults, schools, and entire communities—that are described in the following pages, are consistent with Rogoff’s (2003) reconceptualization of human development as the process of “people’s changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities” (p. 52). They also illustrate the particular relationship between culture and education (Bruner, 1996) by reminding us of the dynamic nature of culture itself. Each of these stories, and many yet to be told, show that change is possible when people in particular places decide to work hard together in a way that is mutually supportive and open to a new image not just of children, but of schools and communities and a more just society. That is the sort of school reform that Dewey dreamed of, that Malaguzzi fought for, and that the 21st century desperately needs.

### Notes

1. Reggio Emilia has been a focus of interest and inquiry in some Western European nations for at least twice as long.
2. A new law mandating university preservice teacher education for Italian early childhood and elementary teachers was passed in 1998 and it is only recently that graduates of those programs have sought employment in these programs, working alongside other teachers whose training has come almost entirely in the form of in-service experiences.

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