



An American Educator Reflects on the Meaning Of the Reggio Experience

We should use the Reggio experience to learn about ourselves — to raise our awareness about the connection between culture and educational practice in the U.S., Ms. Linn maintains. This is where true change begins and is Reggio's most important lesson.

BY MARGARET INMAN LINN

BY THE time Columbus sailed to America, the Italians had articulated a philosophy of child rearing. Around 1490, Lorenzo the Magnificent, the influential political leader of Florence, stated, "If the wild beasts love their young, the much greater should be our indulgence towards our children."¹ Lorenzo was known to take a great interest in the development of his children and in their education, in particular. In a refined form, his philosophy is practiced today in Italy, most notably in the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia.

This profound respect for children — and for childhood — and the way in which it is put into educational practice in the preschools of Reggio Emilia

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has captured the minds of American educators. It has captured many hearts as well. Observers of the preschools of Reggio Emilia come to embrace a way of educating children that is at once responsive, inclusive, and intelligent.

The municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia are deeply rooted in the Italian culture, evolving into their present form over decades of thoughtful work by Reggio's principal founder, Loris Malaguzzi, and many dedicated teachers and parents. During my recent participation in a Reggio study tour, sponsored by Reggio Children, I observed the reactions of my American colleagues, many of whom arrived already steeped in the Reggio lore. We were moved by the Italian art of presentation, a masterly combination of attention to detail and a sense of beauty. One American participant expressed the opinion that this was an idyllic place, in which "all members of society supported each other and contented children never threw tantrums." For many,

Reggio has become more than an intellectual and educational experience; it has become a spiritual quest. In this romantic vision lies a danger — and a missed opportunity for the most important lesson we can learn from the early childhood schools of Reggio Emilia.

It is important to examine this infatuation with Reggio Emilia. Why has this experience taken on for many a meaning far beyond that of an enlightening educational opportunity? First, the exposure to the Reggio culture of childhood has tapped a deep need in many of us to believe that somewhere in this world children are nurtured and valued. American educators are bombarded with statistics suggesting that our society has run amuck — for example, nearly three million children annually are reported to child protective services because of abuse or neglect.² Many gifted teachers burn out and leave the profession because of a feeling of hopelessness, a problem particularly acute in our urban areas.

In addition, many early childhood educators do not feel supported by the systems in which they work. When asked why they left the field of education, many former teachers respond that they felt disempowered and that they had little influence over school policies and practices.³ Contrast this with Reggio Emilia, where reports of abuse are very rare, parents are a supportive and essential presence, and social and political institutions make early childhood education a priority.⁴ Our deep disappointment with the American system of education and our corresponding need to know that somewhere *all is right with the world* have clouded our perceptions of Reggio Emilia and of the American system of education.

It is not surprising that American educators are frustrated when faced with these two very different worlds of education. As early childhood professionals, we are naturally drawn to the nurturing model of education, which motivates and informs Reggio professionals. Because we care deeply about children, we are moved emotionally by this ideal educational world. Yet we must be cognizant of the American reality. Our society requires that we prepare children for a competitive and often dangerous world. When confronted with this inevitable tension between the Italian ideal and our American reality, there is the risk that we will romanticize the ideal.

Still, there is no doubt that we have much to learn from the educators of Reggio Emilia. Certainly, we can learn the value of careful listening and observation.⁵ On the study tour we listen to the Italians' philosophy, see their physically beautiful schools, and observe their sensitive teachers interacting with the children. And, like the teachers in the Reggio schools, we document our observations with careful notes and sketches. However, for many American observers the documentation is an attempt to crystallize an ideal rather than to lay the

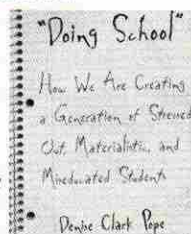
groundwork for further learning and application in the U.S. setting. The next step in the process must be to reflect on our observations and to interpret what we see in order to engage in self-assessment.

Our experiences at Reggio should provoke a dialogue, initially within ourselves and later with others, that ends in increased self-knowledge. If we are to internalize the process of educating young children that Reggio so elegantly presents, we must begin, as indeed the Reggio children themselves begin, by accepting responsibility for our own learning. The Reggio experts cautioned the study tour participants against seeing the preschools of Reggio Emilia as a model or approach to be duplicated in the United States. They appreciate, as we must, that the central issue is more complex than copying the technical points of the Reggio schools. As visiting educators, we were encouraged to find our own way, through thought and reflection. This intellectual work must come first if we are to effect real change at home.

Howard Gardner tells us that "good schools . . . arise from the crucible of their cultures."⁶ All educational values reflect the values of society. In order to improve preschool education in America, educators need first to identify and understand the meaning of childhood in our culture. For example, the Reggio vision sees the child as possessing an "extraordinary wealth of inborn abilities and potential, strength, and creativity."⁷ Reggio's core value of the competent child directs choices about all aspects of the child's development. Emotional development is, at times, encouraged by exposing children to material that may be frightening to some. The idea is to help them develop necessary coping skills in the context of a supportive group.⁸ Intellectual development is encouraged through a similar belief in the child's ability to make meaning of material that is serious. Children with special needs (or "special rights," as they

"Doing School"

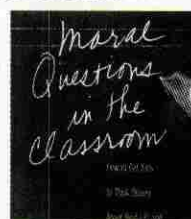
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are called in Reggio Emilia) are not limited by adult perceptions of their cognitive functioning and are included in all activities.

For all children, both the process and the products of their learning are taken seriously, giving a dignity to children's work that is often lacking in American preschools.⁹ Even the physical environment in Reggio schools is considered an important element in a child's learning and is designed to maximize social, creative, and aesthetic development. Spaces are constructed with respect to a child's choice to be away from adults, either alone or in a small group, thus implying the ability to behave appropriately when not under direct supervision.

In contrast to the Reggio image of the child as strong and competent is the American image of the child as the embodiment of needs. Above all, children in the United States are perceived as needing protection. (The sharp contrast between the two visions of child competence was illustrated by a sign I was instructed to hang outside an Italian hotel room if I left my child alone for the evening. It read: "I am alone. If I cry, please tell the concierge.") In the U.S., parents and teachers alike view their role as protectors of the emotional, intellectual, and physical development of each child.

To protect children emotionally, we shelter them from social rejection and the perceived damage to self-esteem by enforcing rules such as "You can't say you can't play." This approach eliminates the possibility of dialogue and negotiation between children. We protect children from failure in the intellectual sphere by ensuring that all academic tasks are within their perceived zone of proximal development. The result is often a lack of sophistication both in our presentation of material and in the child's products. Such protectiveness deprives children of the opportunity for growth that comes with coping with occasional failure. In constructing physi-

cal spaces for children, we have made safety a priority. Given the litigious society in which we live, educators operate under rules that insist that every child be in sight at all times, thereby reducing the possibility of accidents — at the cost of a child's privacy or independence. Many of the tools and materials (e.g., sharp tools for carving clay; bits of metal, wire, and glass) used by Reggio children to express themselves would be forbidden in American preschools — in the name of safety.

In a broader sense, Americans feel that adults know what is best for children, while Reggio adults both encourage children to speak for themselves and, importantly, listen to their voices. Many American early childhood programs have curricula that are planned well in advance. In contrast, the preschools of Reggio Emilia have an emergent curriculum that grows out of the children's interests and differs from year to year and room to room. Rather than decide what the children need to learn, the Reggio educators encourage the children to explore in ways that will be enriching. It is the teacher's role to support that development through careful observation and guidance. This involves trust. First, the educators must believe in the child's ability to display initiative and intelligence. Second, parents must trust educators to nurture their child's development without a prescribed formula for doing so. The parents of Reggio children feel reassured by their relationship with the educators. American parents need more tangible assurances.

To be sure, education is culture-bound, as Gardner stresses, but it is equally true that what we do in our classrooms can come to shape our culture. If our visit to Reggio Emilia has inspired us to work for change at home, we as preschool professionals are in a perfect position to begin that process. If we choose to bring the values of Reggio into our classrooms — and then, we hope, into our

society — some excellent resources provide thoughtful translations for us.¹⁰ These educators caution us, as do the Reggio professionals, against naively copying the educational philosophy and practice of Reggio Emilia.

Viewing current American educational practice through the lens of Reggio Emilia provides an important perspective and raises questions that may not arise without such cross-cultural comparisons. But the experience must be used with care and recognition of the wider environments that shape our own programs and those of Reggio Emilia. We should use the Reggio experience to learn about ourselves — to raise our awareness about the connection between culture and educational practice in the United States. This is where true change begins and is, in my belief, Reggio's most important lesson. This is serious and difficult work — let's not romanticize it.

1. Christopher Hibbert, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall* (New York: William Morrow, 1974), p. 144.

2. Diana English, "Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect," *The Future of Children*, Spring 1998, pp. 39-53.

3. Lawrence Hardy, "Why Teachers Leave," *American School Board Journal*, June 1999, pp. 12-17; and Jianping Shen, "Teacher Retention and Attrition in Public Schools," *Journal of Educational Research*, November/December 1997, pp. 81-88.

4. Louise Cadwell, *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

5. Carlina Rinaldi, "Visible Listening," speech presented to Reggio Study Tour, 30 May 2000.

6. Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 112.

7. Loris Malaguzzi, informational booklet from the Diana School (available from Reggio Children, Reggio Emilia, Italy), 1993.

8. Rebecca New, "Cultural Variations in Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Challenge to Theory and Practice," in Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman, eds., *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1993), pp. 215-32.

9. Lilian Katz, "What Can We Learn from Reggio Emilia?," in Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, pp. 19-37.

10. Cadwell, op. cit.; and Louise Cadwell and Brenda Fyfe, "Conversations with Children," in Joanne Hendrick, ed., *First Steps Toward Teaching the Reggio Way* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill, 1997), pp. 84-98. **K**