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Table of Contents

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Professional and lay interest in how other nations educate and care for their youngest citizens has increased significantly in the United States over the past several decades. The international perspectives that seem to be of greatest interest are those linked to

prevailing concerns in American early childhood education. In the last decade of the 20th century, these concerns included interpretations of social constructivism, implications of brain research, and the meaning of developmental appropriateness in a multicultural society. It was within this context that news of the small city of Reggio Emilia, Italy, came to the United States (New, 1990). Many early childhood specialists have subsequently explored the implications of Reggio Emilia's work for the theory, practice, and improvement of U.S. early childhood education (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Katz & Cesarone, 1994; Cadwell, 1997). The exhibition, "The Hundred Languages of Children," of work from infant-toddler and pre- primary centers in Reggio Emilia has been shown in many U.S. cities. This Digest outlines the history of Reggio Emilia's early childhood programs in order to provide insights to educators in the United States; and it highlights some of Reggio Emilia's less visible contributions, particularly its role in promoting discourse among communities of adults in the United States, as they debate the meaning and significance of their work with young children.

REGGIO EMILIA AND CONTEMPORARY ITALY

In order to fully appreciate what is particular about Reggio Emilia, it is necessary to consider its position within the larger context of contemporary Italy. As is the case with most of its European neighbors, Italy has a national commitment to the period of early childhood that builds upon a widespread cultural value of shared responsibility for young children. Social activism in the late 1960s culminated in a wealth of social policies related to working families with young children, including a 1968 law establishing preschool education for all 3- to 5-year-olds based on the active participation of both the state and local governments (New, 1993). Similar laws for increased provision of infant-toddler care were eventually passed, first in 1971 and most recently in 1999. Italy's system of early childhood education is now a subject of heightened interest as part of national educational reform initiatives (OECD, 2000). In legal texts as well as public conversations, high-quality early care and education are defined as socio-educational services and a right of all Italian children and their families. Reggio Emilia has contributed to both the discussion and interpretation of these Italian principles.

Reggio Emilia is one of several small wealthy cities in Emilia Romagna, a region in northern Italy with a history of collaboration and political activism. The groundwork for what is now regarded as "the Reggio Emilia approach" was established shortly after World War II, when working parents built new schools for their young children. Parents did not want ordinary schools. Rather, they wanted schools where children could acquire skills of critical thinking and collaboration essential to rebuilding and ensuring a democratic society. This strong sense of purpose inspired the late Loris Malaguzzi to join in this collaborative effort. In 1963, well in advance of the national system, Reggio Emilia opened its first municipal preschool. By the late 1970s, a system of municipally funded preschools and infant-toddler centers was in place; it has since served about half of the city's young children. As is the case in other Italian municipal programs, fees (primarily for meals) are on a sliding scale. Children who are not in the city program

attend early educational programs provided by the State, the Church, parent cooperatives, and private organizations.

During the decades following the 1960s, Reggio Emilia educators concentrated on building schools and implementing their developing philosophy; they also participated in national and regional discussions regarding early care and education. Many credit Malaguzzi for bringing together other Italian early childhood educators to share and debate the merits of their diverse approaches to creating environments for young children. In some cities, educators explored strategies to promote connections in and outside of preschool environments, leading, for example, to Pistoia's curriculum-as-apprenticeship model and the multi-year projects in Milan. In cities such as Parma and Modena, university researchers worked with teachers and caregivers to study the implications of attachment theory for infant-toddler care. In all of these settings, documentation was explored as a means of promoting parent and teacher understanding of children's learning and development.

Within the same period of collaborative exploration, Reggio Emilia educators were busy exploring Malaguzzi's ideas--including his belief that creativity is a characteristic way of thinking and responding to the world. These ideas were eventually translated into partnerships of inquiry among teachers, atelieriste [art educators], and pedagogiste [pedagogical coordinators] to discover and nurture children's symbolic languages. Reggio Emilia also served as a leader in examining principles of social management--originally developed for the labor market--as a basis from which to build respectful and enduring home-school relations.

A century after Montessori opened up the Casa dei Bambini in Rome, the diversity of Italian interpretations of high-quality early childhood programs remains consonant with Italy's tradition of innovation and regional variation. The ongoing exchange and debate that has characterized the development of program differences, in turn, continues to reflect (and contribute to) the larger cultural value associated with the period of l'infanzia [early childhood]. There is little question that Reggio Emilia has been a key player in this lively Italian conversation. This role is now heightened by the recent invitation from the Italian Ministry of Education for Reggio Emilia to participate in the development of teacher education programs nationwide. And yet its influence at home pales in contrast to the role Reggio Emilia has played in expanding the vocabulary and the nature of the discourse concerning early childhood education in nations beyond Italy's borders. There are few places where Reggio Emilia's influence has been as widespread as in the United States.

REGGIO EMILIA AND U.S. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The first presentation on Reggio Emilia at an annual conference of the National

Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) took place in Anaheim in 1987. Since that time, inspired by the exhibition "The Hundred Languages of Children" and fueled by delegations of educators who have seen firsthand the city and its early childhood classrooms, American interest in Reggio Emilia has grown at a remarkable pace. Once used as a counter to U.S. notions of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) (New, 1994), the revised version of NAEYC's DAP guidelines is filled with examples from this Italian city (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Interest among American educators is focused on the implications of key features of Reggio Emilia's municipal early childhood program, including:

* the role of the environment-as-teacher,

* children's multiple symbolic languages,

* documentation as assessment and advocacy,

* long-term projects or progettazione,

* the teacher as researcher, and

* home-school relationships.

Efforts to understand and utilize the principles of Reggio Emilia's practices are now described in numerous English-language manuscripts and publications, including theses and dissertations as well as accounts by teachers struggling with the realities of Reggio Emilia's compelling challenge. Reflecting and contributing to this still-rising level of interest is a revised second edition of The Hundred Languages of Children--Advanced Reflections (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998), a Reggio Emilia track at NAEYC's national conference, multiple electronic discussion lists and study groups, a newsletter, annual U.S. delegations, and reference sites. Thus it should be no surprise that Reggio Emilia's "image of the child" has become a dominant theme in discussions on early care and educational policies and practices at the local and national levels. It is this influence--to promote not only change, but reflection, debate,

and conversation--that may well be Reggio Emilia's greatest legacy.

THE CHANGING CULTURE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

While it is premature to make claims about the influence of Reggio Emilia's example on children's lives, there is little question that the field of early childhood education, including teacher education, has been altered as a result of exchanges taking place with Italian colleagues. In settings around the world, educators are now looking with greater attention to children as sources of their own learning, to parents for new ways of thinking about sharing in children's early education, and to each other for support and collaboration in making schools learning communities for adults as well as children. As a result of these cross-cultural conversations, some have begun to use Reggio Emilia as illustrative of how nations might best respond to children's development and learning potentials--in particular, Reggio Emilia's emphasis on local processes of knowledge construction (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; New, 2000). Loris Malaguzzi often repeated his immodest and ambitious goal of changing the culture of childhood. The impact of this advocacy agenda continues to reverberate as parents and teachers, citizens and policy makers in schools, in states, and across nations debate the rights and potentials of young children in a changing global society.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Reggio Emilia section of the ERIC/EECE Web Site: http://ericeece.org/reggio.html

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