How Many Languages Can Reggio Children Speak?

Many More Than a Hundred!

By Jinju Kang

In June 2005, I had an exciting opportunity to see the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, that are well known for the phrase, "the hundred languages of children" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Historically, parents established the schools after World War II. Now there are more than 21 city-run preschools, 13 infant-toddler centers, and 12 schools owned and operated as cooperatives (Gandini, 2003).

During the 5-day tour to Reggio Emilia, we visited five infant-toddler centers, preschools, and community centers; listened to the presentations of a pedagogista (an instructional specialist), an atelierista (an artist), and other teachers; and interacted daily with participants. I wondered, "Were there really 100 ways for children to represent themselves?" To answer this question, I focused on how children represented and expressed themselves. I paid particular attention to children's conversations with various materials.

Throughout the study tour, our Italian hosts repeatedly emphasized collaboration, listening, and potential. Children are inherently social beings, and constructors rather than consumers of education. Children and adults live through interaction and need to engage in relationships. Reggio teachers did not seem to teach direct or right answers; instead, they aroused children's curiosity and motivated them to seek knowledge and build relationships.

I saw the infinite ways that children expressed their ideas in each Reggio school I visited. When I stepped in Balducci, one of Reggio Emilia preschools, I felt as though I were in an art or children's museum. What I observed there was far beyond what I had seen merely in pictures or books. The children's works and those of adults were well combined and displayed on walls, hung from the ceilings, and placed in every corner of the school. At first glance, I thought I was looking at a miniature indoor botanical garden. However, when I entered, I realized it was not just an indoor garden with some ordinary plants or flowers. The garden had natural, as well as child-made, plants and flowers, animals made of clay and wired structures, and plant- or animal-like figures made with other materials. Finding clay-like animals in the woods helped me realize that the adults valued the children's ideas by displaying their garden creatures.

Figure 1. Natural materials.

Figure 2. Metal parts.

Figure 3. A structure made of recycled materials.

Materials for Creating Languages

The teachers provided opportunities for children to interact with materials in numerous ways. Student products included colorful, natural, and recycled materials. Vecchi and Giudici (2004) described the children's dialogue with materials:

> Looking, touching, rotating, smelling, sounding, shaking, lifting, weighing; looking for variations of words to describe them became almost a necessity. . . . The children often began their explorations in this way, some more avidly, some in an almost scientific way, some a bit surprised, some who felt the need to "do something immediately." This is how these elements entered immediately into a relationship among themselves and with other materials. (p. 100)

Natural Materials

Natural materials such as dried leaves, flowers, fruit, branches, and seeds distinguished their classroom from those I have seen in America. In a mini-atelier, I counted more than 50 natural materials. Combined with clay, light, and beads, these materials did not have fixed shapes and stimulated children to tell their stories in any way they wanted with an infinite number of materials (see Figure 1).

Recycled Materials

Recycled materials were one of the most important types—pipes, fishing wire, bike wheels, fishing nets, small metal parts, wires, computer parts, fax machines, computer keyboards, computer disks, plastic bottles, glass bottles, and vacuum hoses. With the help of Remedia, the recycling center that houses, recycles, and supplies materials to Reggio Emilia schools, children experienced various media (see Figures 2 and 3). The children recreated gadgets into artistic products to tell their stories and feelings. In one of the schools, I saw an elaborate car structure in the piazza that was made of various recycled materials—a deserted child's chair for a car seat, a computer joy stick for a gearshift, bottles connected through hoses for engine parts, a computer screen, a fax machine, and other computer parts used as auto parts. Another structure, titled a "scent detector," looked authentic, with a vacuum hose, CDs, computer chips, and other recycled objects. Using these materials seemed to motivate the children to be original by applying new uses to once-fixed items.

Materials of Diverse Colors

The teachers in Reggio schools prepared palettes of colors of pens, paper, and sand. The children repeatedly created different combinations using the colored materials on various backgrounds that contributed to the development of their keen sense of color (see Figure 4).

Introducing Perspectives

The teachers in Reggio schools made overhead projectors, mirrors, and light tables available for children to explore diverse perspectives. The overhead projectors also introduced new ways of conversing with materials. Enlarging images helped the children observe the materials' details, such as the textures of leaves that cannot be seen with the naked eye. This experience broadened children's views of the materials in their world. For example, in one of the Balducci preschool classrooms, the documentation showed that an enlarged picture of a child-made paper horse elicited conversations and riding attempts.

Mirrors made it possible for the children to see themselves—both back and forth in different clothes in dramatic areas and what the backs of their bodies looked like. In particular, a triangular mirror, called a *travestimenti* in Italian, allowed the children to see other perspectives.

The light table added aesthetically pleasing colors with rhinestones and other eye-pleasing gems. In one of the Balducci preschool classrooms, a girl and a boy created a flower garden on the light table. Dried flowers, leaves, and rhinestones became a beautiful bunch of flowers, wrinkled green paper became the grass around the flowers, and a cluster of sliced green plastic became a bush. The children turned colorful candy wrappers into another bouquet of flowers. The light table added more aesthetic ambience to the garden. Through these active relationships with various materials, the children elaborated their ideas that became visible in a beautiful garden.

Methods for Creating Languages

I found three means by which Reggio Emilia schools encouraged children to build their languages: (a) the combination of diverse materials, (b) the respect for children's abilities, and (c) the belief in working with others. These values increased the possibility of children developing and representing their own ideas, feelings, and thoughts.

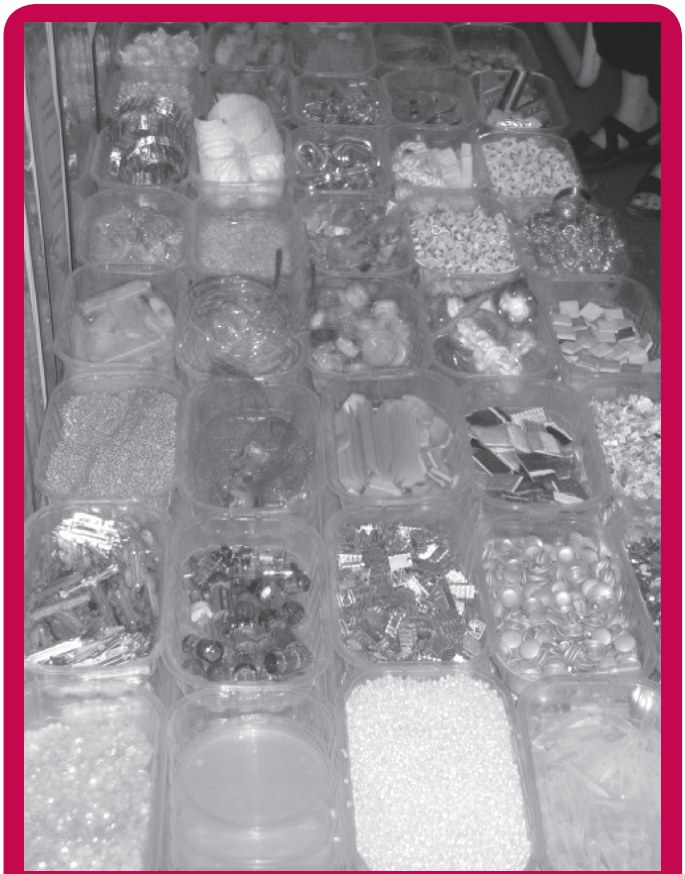

Figure 4. Palettes of colors.

Combinations of Diverse Materials

In a mini-atelier, several children observed a photo of a bird spreading its big wings and drew it on letter-sized paper. On another table in the same class, two boys decorated a big bird drawn on large-sized paper. They experienced and created different concepts using various feathers every time.

The students mixed diverse materials together in three-dimensional or structured ways. They placed paper dolls in see-through boxes. Each paper doll had a different facial expression and physical movements. One transparent box had a mirror on the back, giving visibility to the back of the paper doll. This approach broadened the children's perspectives by seeing things that others do not usually see.

Furthermore, any place surrounding the schools could be a canvas or notebook for children to tell their stories. In addition to art on walls, children's works were placed on the ground, on trees, or in any place with a different meaning. In one infant toddler center, all the natural materials, such as logs, dried leaves, sliced fruit, sand, pebbles, stones, and dried seeds, were laid out on the ground in patterns. These patterns seemed to represent the sea world. Because

the free combination of materials allowed children to be open to various ideas without being restricted to one right answer, they revealed their own thoughts, ideas, or understandings more broadly.

Respect for Children's Abilities

One of the philosophies of Reggio Emilia schools is a respect for children's abilities. This trust in children's abilities seemed to encourage the creation of new products. Each individual work demonstrated value and worth. Some of the works were used to decorate the classes, schools, and community centers (see Figure 5). Each three-dimensional structure standing in the piazza or hanging down from the ceiling conveyed which projects had been completed recently. On each wall, documentation boards described students' experiences. The documentation boards contained photos of the children's works and an explanation of them, which seemed to be similar to pamphlets or brochures from museums. Some of the children's works were put into frames or transparent acrylic boxes and displayed in front of the class. These ways of exhibiting the children's works were aesthetically pleasing and provided opportunities for children to appreciate their own works and those of others. More interestingly, one school had an ongoing project of decorating the pillars of the International Center. This project seemed to help the children become involved in the region and develop a sense of contribution and connection to the community.

Collaboration

Reggio schools also emphasized collaborative work. As Nimmo (1998) stated,

> What is different here is that the focus or value is not on ownership, but rather on the sharing of perspectives. . . . one child commenting on, or even working on, another child's drawing, painting, or other representation. . . . the goal for representation to be a means of communication—a symbolic language for the exchange of ideas between and among children and adults. Representation is more than the expressive act of an individual; it is, instead, an invitation to interact. (p. 299)

In most classes in the United States, when time is up, students must put away what they are doing. However, in Reggio classes, there is no rule like this. Rather, children were allowed to leave what they were working on, and the next time, other children added their ideas, stories, and feelings to what their friends did before them. It was a natural situation for children to extend and broaden each idea with different perspectives. Those collaborative efforts were another way children developed relationships.

Figure 5. Decorating the outside of Remedia center.

There was evidence of collaboration in every school. Each individual work became a part of the group's works displayed on the walls. The combination of individual pieces produced large, novel structures. The garden itself reflected relationships among the children. By itself, each of the children's works was simply an animal or a clay plant, but together, their collaborative work created a large and beautiful garden.

Implications for Early Childhood Gifted Educators

An appropriate learning environment for young children nurtures their "strengths, interest, and abilities" (National Association for Gifted Children, 2006, p. 2). Reggio schools demonstrate how the environment provides the possibilities for enhancing the way children think critically and creatively. Many objects in our daily lives may be used to express ideas and new perspectives—leaves, pebbles, shells, plastic bottles, clothing, copper, bike wheels, fishing nets, or computer parts. Nonetheless, we pay little attention to them. In addition, we must be confident and believe that young children are capable and competent. We must provide opportunities for them to collaborate to develop the relationships that enhance their social and emotional competencies. If children combine the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of types of

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level in a relay contest. He will be a senior this fall and continues to excel in a lot of things he does. He's also made a couple of really close friends, also gifted kids from Uni, who like to go to each other's houses and play video games together. I think this is great because even gifted kids need some down time sometimes—time to get their minds off academics and just have some fun and be kids.

I guess the main ideas that I've come away with is to allow and even encourage your child to ask questions and explore the different answers, give positive acknowledgement to what he or she does, and get excited with him or her at learning new things. Surrounding your child with peers who are also excited about learning helps a lot. So, if there are programs in which your child can participate with others who also get excited about learning, go for it. And at the same time, let your kid be a kid. Encourage his academic learning, but also show him that having fun once in a while and being a well-rounded person will make him be a much happier person. GCT

Books Joseph Enjoyed Reading

Farndon, J. (2000). *4000 things you should know*. Essex, NJ: Miles Kelly.

McKie, A., & Royston, G. (1995). *1000 fantastic facts*. London: Grandreams Limited.

Parker, S. (1993). *The Random House book of how nature works*. New York: Random House.

Resnick, J. P. (1998). *The kids' fun-filled question & answer book*. Chicago: Kidsbooks.

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materials in hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of ways, can you imagine how many languages they could speak?

The Reggio Emilia schools were stellar examples of appropriate learning environments where teachers could nurture strengths, potentials, and diverse needs of young children. I shared my experiences in order to encourage others to visit the schools in Reggio Emilia, and to be inspired as I was to offer young children hundreds and hundreds of languages to develop their various gifts and talents. GCT

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of cutting behavior, unlike tattooing and piercing, is rooted in experiences of emotional pain. Cutting seems to provide temporary solace to the person who engages in this self-injurious act.

It is important to watch for signs of emotional distress among our gifted population and to seek counseling support if there is any evidence of cutting or scratching having taken place. This particular set of behaviors requires the assistance of experts in the psychological arena and fall well outside the realm of typical patterns of social and emotional needs of gifted students. With vigilance in looking for and referring children who show evidence of these self-injurious acts, we can help them through this difficult and complicated period of their lives by providing the emotional safety net they need. GCT

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