

Foreword Lessons from Reggio

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Through a decade of collaboration and association around the Making Learning Visible project and through the friendships that have evolved in that time, we at Project Zero* have learned many lessons. These lessons have influenced virtually every aspect of our ways of being in the world, but certainly our understanding of schools, our teaching, our ways of working in collaborations, even how we are with family and friends.

The need for accountability in American education has been the cornerstone for the standards-driven reform movement of the 1990s and continues to dominate our educational thought and practice. We are, in this moment in the United States, so deeply invested in the idea of psychometric and “scientific” justifications for our educational practices that we seem to have forgotten there could be any other justification paradigm. We seem to have forgotten there could be any other way to hold ourselves accountable.

Some days I wonder if the path we’re on is leading somewhere, or nowhere...is just difficult and long, or truly impossible. I would probably be far more confused—and despondent—if the Reggio experience didn’t remind me of another possibility.

Reggio educators accept responsibility for their decisions and choices, for providing an account of what they are doing, and why, and what then happens in the school. They don’t pass the assessment of their choices on to someone else or to a test to determine. They embrace a tradition of philosophical justification that is far older than psychometrics, one that explains educational choices by tracing decisions back to basic questions about our image of the child, the teacher, the school.

In this psychometric age, philosophic justifications of educational practice are generally characterized as soft, vague, or lacking in rigor. Yet anyone who visits the schools in Reggio quickly recognizes there is no lack of rigor in what they do. Indeed, there is virtually no aspect of the classroom or school environment too small for deep and rigorous examination. Every moment of the day, every detail of the physical environment, every dimension of

*Project Zero, a research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has investigated the development of learning processes in children, adults, and organizations since 1967.



relationships in the school is considered, debated, refined. Choices are examined in relation to the ideas that animate them and the actual experiences of children and teachers in the classroom. This is endless work. What is decided today is reconsidered next year, next week, or the next day.

Ironically, as attractive and inspiring as the Reggio schools are to so many American educators, most of us believe we don't have the time to think through our practice as they do. I don't think it is a problem of time so much as commitment to the deep level of rigorous thought and debate that infuses daily life in the Reggio schools. Perhaps we hesitate as we approach this alternative paradigm of accountability because we know instinctively that it is a difficult path, demanding much of those who follow it.

Yet it seems always better to be on a difficult—even extremely difficult—path than a path that, in my heart, I believe won't lead where I want to go. The challenge and beauty of coming to know the experience in Reggio is to confront the possibility that I could work—as they have—with others to create the reality I would like to live in...whatever the demands of that creative act.

Preface

The Editors

One great good fortune for young children, their parents, and their teachers has been the journey of ideas and practices developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy, into the North American educational context. A subsequent benefit has been the effort of thoughtful educators over time to interpret and reinvent those ideas and practices. They have done this in their infant/toddler centers and preschools or in teacher preparation programs, in harmony with their respective local communities and cultural contexts.

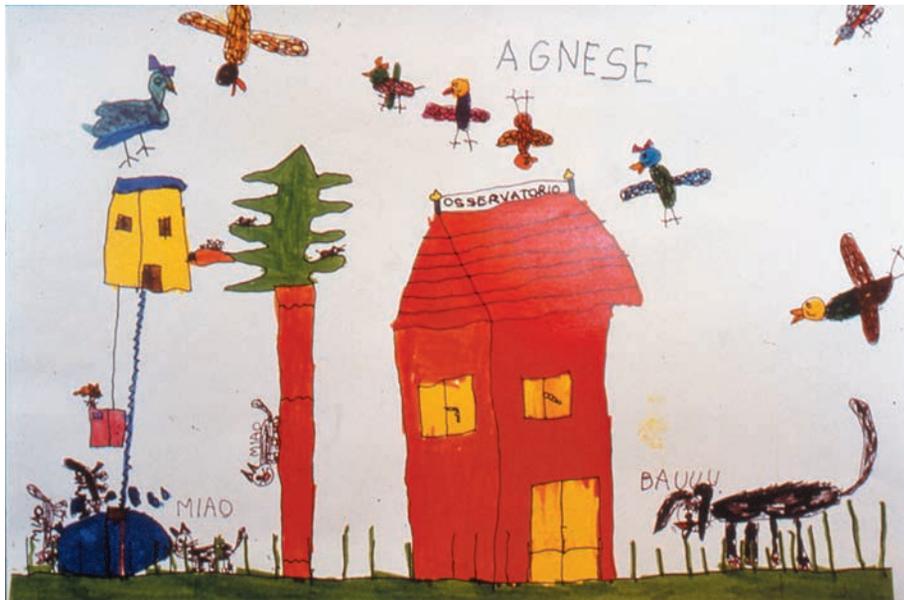
Here in this book is a varied and energizing sample of those interpretations, conducted in different places and from different perspectives. They all reflect a deep appreciation of the basic values of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, values that resonate with the historical roots of progressive education.

But why this book now?

We, as editors and contributors, want to offer to our colleagues in Reggio Emilia these expressions of gratitude for what they have offered and continue to offer us. We find the same intention and desire among all the contributors who joined in. The intent is to try to give, in return, visible and tangible evidence that documents today what began many years ago, even before the launching of *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibit in California in 1987.¹

Insights and Inspirations from Reggio Emilia captures and celebrates thirty years of the Reggio Emilia innovative presence and inspiration in North American early childhood educational thought and practice. It is a narrative in word and image, representing the voices of teachers, scholars, and policy makers whose professional philosophies and practices have been changed and, in many cases, truly transformed by their study of the Reggio Emilia approach. Each contribution tells a story (in narrative or poetic and visual form) that recounts experiences, lessons learned, reflections, reinterpretations, and initiatives connected with encounters with the philosophy and practices of Reggio. These signs of gratitude honor first and foremost the legacy of Loris Malaguzzi (1920–1994), who developed and constructed with collaborators and teachers what is now known around the world as the Reggio Emilia approach. These signs honor as well his colleagues who are continuing to develop his philosophy, using novel avenues fully in harmony with his dynamic original view of exploring new ways and new sources of learning that can create a diversity of connections and relationships.

¹The exhibition¹, a tribute to the many ways children have to communicate, first landed in the United States in 1987. Updated and revised in 1995, the exhibit describes and illustrates the philosophy and pedagogy of the Reggio Emilia approach through photographs that depict moments of teaching and learning, children's words, and samples of children's work such as paintings, collages, clay, and constructions. This beautiful and intriguing visual display narrates an educational story, weaving together experiences, reflections, debates, theoretical premises, and the social and ethical ideals of many generations of teachers, children, and parents.



We have invited contributions from those involved in the study of Reggio Emilia from its first presence in North America to those discovering and exploring the approach more recently. These include the voices of well-known and regarded scholars and administrators, as well as the active, perhaps less known, voices of the teachers in the everyday classroom, who give powerful witness to the effectiveness of the approach. The diversity of messages and stories gives value to the power of what has been learned from the encounter with the educators and schools of Reggio Emilia and of how it has been translated and reinvented, all the while respecting the experience and context of each person and place. To bring changes in one's own way of teaching requires a strong personal and political choice. Furthermore, to bring change in a school requires a social and democratic commitment by all involved, with the determination to build stronger relationships and collaborations.

As we worked to prepare this surprise for our friends in Reggio, we came to realize that it would not be possible to represent all of the dedicated and serious educators engaged in the transformation inspired by Reggio now taking place in North American preschools, public schools, child care centers, and infant/toddler centers. Thus, the most evident shortcoming of this book is that it contains only a limited number of voices.

Each contributor has submitted an image or images (photographs, a piece of children's work) to accompany her or his narrative. The images expand and enhance the written text and, conversely, the written text expands and enhances the images. The contributions reflect documentation and presentation in expressive languages—verbal as well as visual—in keeping with the spirit of the Reggio Emilia approach, which regards children as possessing a hundred different languages for learning and communicating—when adults provide them with the possibility.

Insights and Inspirations

This collection begins with a series of introductions that include a visual sign of gratitude from educator and author Cathy Weisman Topal (“Is It Possible to Say ‘Thank You’ with an Image?”); brief introductions to the schools and city of Reggio Emilia, including descriptions of the common values and principles that guide the ideas and pedagogy of the educators in that city, from educator and author Lella Gandini; and cognitive psychologist and author Jerome Bruner’s homage to Reggio Emilia “from an honorary citizen.” Here we learn why Professor Bruner returns every year to visit the city and the schools for young children where he found a way of learning and teaching close to the ideas he has worked for in education in the United States.

This book’s six main sections are organized around major themes that emerged from the contributors’ efforts. The first theme engages Loris Malaguzzi and what he termed “the image of the child” as currently presented in *The Hundred Languages of Learning*, the historic exhibit about early childhood education in Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi was founder² of the public system of preschools and infant/toddler centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy. A tirelessly innovative and influential thinker, Malaguzzi placed great value on practice, both for the transformation of theory and, in turn, the generation of new ideas.

The Notes section at the end of the book provides interested readers with sources for quotations and further reading about these ideas.

The subsequent sections of the book are organized around these themes:

a renewed image of the teacher

children, thought, and learning made visible through documentation

the hundred languages of children: the role of materials and the atelier

the power of communication

history and civic awareness: building environments and communities

Each themed section begins with a brief overview of the contributions for that section and how each piece can serve for further reflection and inspire strategies for practice with children. We then introduce the section with commentary or reflection by Loris Malaguzzi, by his colleagues, and other educational leaders on the philosophy and practices of the Reggio Emilia approach. In our effort to engage not only teachers and preservice teachers but also those who themselves prepare these individuals, we the editors believe that these introductory passages hold much potential for further reflection and analysis.

We would like to thank many people who have helped us prepare this book, among them James McGuire, and, above all, Wyatt Wade of Davis Publications and his talented group of editors and designers.

We strongly hope that this book will serve as a useful source of information for those new to the Reggio Emilia approach and of support both for teachers who are beginning to explore the ideas of Reggio Emilia and for those who are working to refine their understanding of the approach.