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**Review: Lucy Boyd Cadwell's *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home:
An Innovative Approach to Early Childhood Education***

by

Mary Mindess

Reggio Emilia is a municipality in Italy which has become world renowned for the educational program it provides for children birth to age 6. The distinctive features of the Reggio Emilia approach include the belief that the child has enormous potential and that this potential can be nurtured through the school environment. The approach pays particular attention to engaging children in thought provoking experiences, in cultivating their imaginations, and in empowering them to express ideas in a myriad of ways. There is an emphasis on documentation as a recording and teaching tool, the co-participation in the school of parents and the community, and on ongoing teacher training. The approach is firmly rooted in the Italian culture. It has received attention from many American educators who are interested in the ways in which this approach operationalizes a cognitive-developmental perspective in early childhood education. The book *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home* by Lucy Boyd Cadwell helps to clarify the similarities and differences between Italian and American cultures and articulates in detail the various aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach as it is carried out in programs for children ages 3-6 years of age.

The book is written as a first person account of the author's experiences. The author and her family lived for a year in Reggio Emilia, Italy, while she interned in two Reggio schools: Diana and La Villetta. The first part of the book conveys the author's impressions and reflections on this experience. In the second part of the book, the author details the following three years in which she served as a consultant and atelierista at the College School of Webster Groves in St. Louis, Missouri. This school was part of a Danforth-funded project designed "to study and adapt the Reggio Approach in a consortium of schools in St. Louis" (p. 7).

The descriptions in the first part of the book—or perhaps they are better called stories as the author refers to them—enable the reader to experience vicariously many aspects of the culture in Reggio Emilia and share, through the author's eyes, a close-up view of the school program at the Diana School. The author describes life in Reggio Emilia in terms of the traditional morning coffee at the cafes, the leisurely bicycle rides through the beautiful countryside, the aroma of pasta cooking with special Italian sauces, the graciousness in the way that meals are served, and the easy pace with which conversations take place at meal time. These images are woven into narrative accounts about education in Reggio Emilia. They invite the reader to enter into the experiences and to take from them what seems most meaningful.

With a penchant for providing interesting detail, the author describes life in schools in Reggio Emilia: the environment, the adults, children, materials, and the power of relationships in the Reggio Emilia school culture. Included are detailed stories that provide an overview of a day in the Diana School, the multiple ways in which materials are presented to children, and a clear description of the space (enhanced by the inclusion of several colored plates and many black and white photographs). Through the use of precise language, the author helps the reader to appreciate many subtleties that represent critical components in the Reggio Emilia philosophy. For example, she describes the morning meeting:

At around 9:00, after the parents have gone, Marina and Paola call the group together for a meeting. The children gather on the wooden risers, as the pears, which were prepared earlier in the kitchen, are served. "Well, how was your weekend? Who picked those beautiful flowers? Where were you? Carla, you were away for 3 days. Tell me about your trip to the mountains. What did you find? What did you bring back?"

Children and teachers chat, catch up, and share the pleasure of each other's company. There isn't any rush, there isn't a feeling that there is a need for control on the teachers' part. It is just a pleasure. "Well, what do we have going today?" (pp. 17-18)

From this description, the reader gains a sense of the atmosphere which pervades the classroom and how this atmosphere is reflected in the relationship between children and teacher. The reference to the observation that the teachers do not have a need for control is important. This is the author's unobtrusive way of calling attention to the respect which characterizes relationships within the Reggio Emilia classroom environment. The way in which control is perceived frequently differentiates the Reggio philosophy from some other educational perspectives.

Richly detailed descriptions are provided throughout the book. They are reflected in the discussion of parent participation and in accounts of the collaboration among staff. The author describes the collaboration between two teachers (the pedagista and a classroom teacher) as a beautiful dance. (These two people have worked together for 15 years. What does this say about teacher turnover in Reggio Emilia, especially in contrast with the turnover rate in the United States?) In the conversation between the two teachers the reader is given the chance to experience, in full force, the feeling elements and the content that characterize teacher dialogue at the Diana School.

Now, I follow Marina and Vea's conversation, their exchange of ideas, their excitement, their wondering together ... This way of touching base, discussing what has happened with the children, trying to understand, agreeing what might be discussed with the children next, what materials to suggest, how to follow the process of their learning is a part of the daily routine at the Diana School. It happens with Vea and at least one of the pairs of teachers from all three classes in the morning before the day begins and again in the late morning as the children are finishing their morning work. (p. 16)

Three pages later in the text—after pranzo (lunch) on the same day—Vea and Marina are conversing again. They talk about what some of these children did during the morning, how they represented their ideas through materials. They consider the children's actual conversations as they have been recorded by one of the teachers. The project on which the children have been working focuses on trees. The teachers talk about the children's drawing of trees and the theories they have expressed in their drawings. The teachers strive to understand the children's ideas and then determine how to proceed. Throughout the teachers' study of the children's project work, the teachers themselves (and the reader) begin to understand the children's thinking and obtain clues as to ways to carry this thinking further.

Teacher collaboration is clearly a value in the Reggio Emilia Approach. The examples which Cadwell provides show how this and other values are translated into practice. Through many such specific stories the reader comes to appreciate more fully why the Reggio Emilia schools have achieved the very positive reputation they enjoy in educational circles.

Those who have viewed the Reggio exhibit, "The Hundred Languages of Children," when it was on tour in the United States frequently have expressed a sense of wonder regarding how such young children, 3-6 years of age, produce such detailed representational work. Cadwell, through her accounts of process and products in the Reggio Emilia schools and more specifically in her discussion of the garden project, provides clues to help answer this question. One aspect of the garden project was the designing of a grow table. The author includes designs prepared by several pairs of children. Accompanying the designs is detailed documentation of the discussions and a clear picture of the value of revisiting specific aspects of a project several times.

The book includes many project examples: animal dens, spaceships, the sky, earth, trees. (Note the emphasis on the natural environment, a characteristic of the Reggio schools and also one of the author's passionate interests. It also captures children's attention.) As the author tells the stories of these projects, she incorporates incidents involving unique ways of using materials. On one occasion the teachers placed Plexiglas on the ground outside so that children, in effect, could walk on the mirror.

It became a great provocation. We walked on the sky and in some way, we were able to touch it. (p. 28)

On another occasion slides of the natural environment were projected on the screen using an overhead projector. The children were able to interact with the projected environment. The experience stimulated their imaginations, and they created their own stories.

The material is fresh, always fresh. The teachers are on their toes, their minds are alive, their experience with this way of working runs deep. They are working with ideas, children's ideas represented in graphics—soft pencil, colored pencils and colored markers. They ... invite and challenge (children) to work together, to pool their ideas, their individual styles of working and particular strengths. (pp. 15-16)

Practical ideas are continuously intertwined with reflections, reflections that are clearly based on theoretical understanding. The chapter titled "The Pleasure and Power of Playing with Materials" identifies several themes which guide the teachers' presentation of materials:

- the cultivation of a sense of wonder and amazement
- the invitation to notice and play with everyday phenomena that often go unnoticed
- the encouragement to make connections between lived experience and materials in order to shape, communicate, and hold the experience rather than letting it disperse and lose significance
- the delicate role of the adult in allowing the child to take the lead while also encouraging the child to wonder, notice, and make the relationships that would allow a new level of understanding to develop. (p. 28)

To support these principles the author cites the work of many theorists—in the field of art, Lowenfeld and Burton; in the discussion of fantasy, Bruno Bettelheim; cognitive psychologists like Heinz, Werner, Piaget, Vygotsky, and many others. In one instance, the author comments on children's animistic thinking, a quality which the cognitive psychologists have identified as characteristic of preoperational thought. Cadwell views animism as a way that children see their world, as "their own special intelligence." She believes that this trait should be viewed not as behavior that is "cute or incorrect," but rather as a way to help teachers learn by listening to

children's expressions of animistic thought. "We have much to learn from the children we listen to" (p. 66). This is an interesting perspective.

She also quotes many of the Italian leaders who have made significant contributions to the development of the Reggio philosophy: Loris Malaguzzi, Vea Vecchi, Carlina Rinaldi, Amelia Gambetti, and others whose words so powerfully capture the essence of the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education. "For plants to thrive and flourish," says Loris Malaguzzi, "they need the best conditions. Your children do also" (p. 94). The prologue in the book contains a concise description of the basic tenets of the philosophy. The epilogue provides a succinct analysis of the cultural similarities and differences between Italy and the United States.

Despite its sometimes overly detailed descriptions, this book is a valuable addition to the literature about the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education. Its unique contribution lies in the fact that the author has been intimately engaged in the process in which many American educators are seeking to become involved. They see in the Reggio Approach ways to strengthen their own programs. For this reason they can particularly appreciate Cadwell's account of the successes which the programs in St. Louis have enjoyed and consider with intense interest the obstacles which parent-teacher committees have encountered. These obstacles include the issue of fairness—having one teacher spend 45 minutes or more with a small group of children, the need to create private spaces in which to engage in in-depth conversations, the expectations teachers have about young children's ability to sit for long periods of time engaged in discussion, the value of emergent curriculum, the lack of teacher skill in conducting extended conversations, the difficulty of recording children's words and ideas, and the time and skill necessary for team planning.

For those embarking on this process, Cadwell recommends that, rather than starting in a holistic manner, people begin by articulating a few specific goals. One goal which seems particularly appropriate for preservice as well as inservice teachers is strengthening the ability to engage children in thought-provoking conversations. In this effort, analysis of the dialogues which Cadwell provides can be very helpful. Her comments about documentation, reflection, and the importance of first-hand experience in this process bear thoughtful scrutiny.

To all who are motivated to look at their own teaching practices in the light of the Reggio experience, the advice which Loris Malaguzzi gave to Louise Cadwell as she was about to embark on her journey to "bring Reggio Emilia home" is worth considering. "It's not that hard, it can't be that hard—you always have to remember: Take one step forward and two steps back. Think about what you are doing. Don't rush forward without stopping.... *In bocca al lupo!*" (pp. 59-60), which translated means, "Good luck!" and is literally translated, "Jump in the wolf's mouth!"