

ABSOLUTELY THE MOST EXCITING THING' THAT'S HOW MANY LOCAL EDUCATORS FEEL ABOUT THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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5 November 1996
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
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At The Clayton Schools' Family Center, a group of toddlers, fascinated by two hermit crabs that inhabited a terrarium in the classroom, were encouraged by their teachers to study them more closely.

The children watched how the crabs crawled in the sand. They observed them in an aquatic environment. They squirted them with water bottles to see how the crabs emerged from their shells. The months-long project helped to support language, social development and even cognitive concepts like size differentiation and relationships in children as young as 18 to 24 months.

Meanwhile, at The St. Michael School, several 4- and 5-year-olds observed that their school, located at St. Michael and St. George Episcopal Church, looked like a castle. That conversation launched an investigation into knights, dungeons, dragons, gargoyles and the like. When one child expressed a desire to build a castle, it turned into a long-term, clay-and-wire class project guided by a visual arts teacher, or atelierista.

And when a group of preschoolers at The College School in Webster Groves expressed fanciful theories about weather changes, it resulted in in-depth, hands-on research. The children studied cloud formations. They took walks on rainy days, examining puddles through magnifying glasses.

These examples represent a radical departure from the it's-November-so-let's-draw-Thanksgiving-turkeys type of classroom planning that most of us grew up with. Experiences like these are one of the hallmarks of Reggio Emilia, an approach that is generating more interest among early childhood educators than anything since the Montessori method early in this century.

Reggio Emilia - named for the northern Italian city in which it took root 33 years ago under educator/psychologist Loris Malaguzzi - has been studied and emulated internationally for years, particularly in the Scandinavian countries. But it is a relatively new phenomenon in the United States. And St. Louis is in the forefront of looking at ways to adapt it, American-style.

Why?

It all began five years ago when Webster University and the St. Louis Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC) co-sponsored a traveling exhibit, "The Hundred Languages of Children," from the Reggio Emilia schools.

Brenda Fyfe, now acting dean at Webster University's School of Education, had seen an adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach in action during a visit to Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1988. Impressed by the children's project work there - and the depth of knowledge it conveyed - she resolved to learn more, and in 1990 took her first trip to

Reggio Emilia, a city of 130,000 about 40 miles north west of Bologna. p She discussed her experience with AEYC members, and accompanied several of them to Washington, D.C., to see the exhibit there. Lori Geismar-Ryan, then president of the St. Louis AEYC, remembered it being "absolutely THE most exciting thing we'd seen in a long, long time."

By 1995, three schools - The College School, The St. Michael's School and The Clayton Schools' Family Center - were selected by Reggio Emilia educators to work toward the designation of "reference points" - schools that have made significant progress in adapting the approach and worthy of observation by other educators.

Since then the schools have cooperated closely to perfect their practices here, consulting with Amelia Gambetti, a veteran teacher and official liaison from Reggio Emilia, working with The Model Early Learning Center, a Head Start center in Washington that is certified in the Reggio approach, and sending staffers to study at the Italian schools.

Their work is beginning to gain recognition, both through presentations and publications.

So what is all the excitement about the Reggio approach about? Just ask Melanie Redler, mother of two young sons who attend The College School.

"I was not searching for Reggio when I went to observe the preschool. But as soon as I walked into the room, there was no question in my mind that it was close to my idea of what education for this age group should be about," she says.

"There were no alphabet charts - instead, children's artwork and conversations covered the walls. Children were busy building elaborate block designs, playing dress-up, spending time outside, learning about friends. There was no pressure to perform, no formal emphasis on pre-math or pre-reading skills, and no one was afraid to ask questions. Yet I saw very powerful projects - thoughtful and incredibly detailed - in progress."

Though elaborate, lavishly documented projects may be the most visible sign of a Reggio-inspired school, the philosophy behind the approach rests on the image of children as competent individuals with the innate ability to construct their own knowledge of the world about them.

"For so long, we viewed children as empty cups, waiting to be filled. Now we see them as cups that are already very full. Our challenge is to help them to pour out their contents," says Ashley Cadwell, headmaster of St. Michael's School.

To that end, there is no set curriculum in a Reggio Emilia program. Instead, it evolves from the children's interests - guided and shaped by teachers who act as provocateurs, listening to and observing the children closely, then asking questions, offering hypotheses and theories and providing occasions for discovery and learning.

"I'm convinced that thoughtful observation of children by teachers is key to this style of work," says Geismar-Ryan.

That is not to say that plenty of pre-math and pre-reading skills do not come into play in a Reggio program. It's just that they are not taught out of context, which "takes away the pleasure of learning," explains Gambetti, who was recently consulting in St.

Louis.

So, for example, when children in Reggio Emilia became fascinated by a squirrel family - a rarity there - they not only read about them and recorded their observations, but they devised recipes for a special treat for them. Language and numbers were a natural consequence of the "nut torte" project, says Gambetti.

Of course, Reggio teachers do not stop there. They believe that children express themselves through at least a hundred different "languages" - among them music, clay, dance, watercolor, puppets, wire, shadow work, wood - and encourage access to each media. The results, at times, can be astounding in their sophistication.

Other characteristics of the Reggio approach?

The importance of environment:

In Italy, schools are modeled after the home to promote a natural, family feeling. The kitchen is central, and children spend much time helping in the preparation of meals. Particular attention is paid to the design and organization of materials; underlying order as well as beauty is stressed.

Spaces for small group interactions as well as entire class discussions are provided to enhance communication. Of utmost importance is the atelier, or studio, a bright, airy resource area used by all children and teachers.

The outside environment also plays a large part in the lives of the children. Whatever attracts their attention in the world around them - from native animals to interesting rocks or vegetable gardens - is fair game for further investigation.

The involvement of parents:

Because the Reggio approach recognizes that learning goes hand-in-hand with the well-being of children, mothers and fathers participate actively in the life of the classroom.

The extensive documentation of events not only helps children reflect on their experiences, it also keeps parents informed. And when special needs arise, parents often volunteer not only materials, but time. At The College School, for example, one class became fascinated with pirates. By the end of their project, parents had built an elaborate pirate ship which still stands as a permanent playground structure.

A different idea of time:

This may be the biggest challenge in adapting the Reggio approach to fast-paced, result-oriented American culture. Not only is class curriculum not dictated by the calendar, but it is open-ended. The Reggio approach recognizes that each child has his or her particular timeclock. If some members of a group have lost interest in a topic while others are still focused on it, allowances are made to accommodate both groups.

And children generally stay with the same teachers and peer groups for more than one school year, reducing the amount of time needed to recognize particular interests and personal rhythms.

An emphasis on cooperation, not competition:

Learning is seen as a journey of discovery in the Reggio approach. There are no right answers, only lots of good questions. And it's not only the children who collaborate as researchers; the teachers do, too. A strong collegial relationship exists among staff members, who constantly discuss and refine their work to promote the deepest thinking possible in the classroom.

"The Reggio approach is about respect - for one another, for ideas, for the environment," says Jennifer Strange, a College School teacher. "What children have to say is important. Their words require continuous reflection and assessment on our part."

"So much of current American education is reductive - rote, archaic and insulting to children," adds Ashley Cadwell. "This is an expansive view. It provokes in-depth reflection upon experiences, uses a rich variety of materials for expression, and stresses collaboration."