January 2006

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**Opus Citation**

Merz, Alice H. and Glover, Matt (2006) 'Are We There Yet?: One Public School's Journey in Appropriating the Reggio Emilia Approach,' *scholarlypartnershipsedu*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5. Available at: [http://opus.ipfw.edu/spe/vol1/iss1/5](http://opus.ipfw.edu/spe/vol1/iss1/5)

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Are We There Yet?: One Public School’s Journey in Appropriating the Reggio Emilia Approach

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore what it means to be inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. One exploration examines the historical start-up of the Reggio Emilia Early Childhood Centers as a way to understand where one is headed and where others have been. The other exploration examines one public school that embarked on a quest to be inspired by the Reggio Emilia Early Childhood Center philosophy, without the need to call itself a “Reggio” school. As the public school learned to do this, the teachers and principal figured out a way to appropriate ideas over time, while avoiding its becoming a “thing” that becomes prescriptive and stigmatizing. While the school was appropriating ideas, they were able to find opportunities and support for growing at different rates and for revisiting ideas in new ways. Each story is told by the principal of the school and is followed by an analysis. As the analysis unfolds, the authors add additional perspectives that become part of the reflective analyses. Finally, the authors step back to examine how all of the parts fit back into the larger picture of the school’s development and place of inspiration.

Introduction

It is “a dialectic of interpretation, between the near and far, the familiar and unfamiliar, between the known or foreign.” (Geanellos, 2000, p. 114)

Are we there yet? In relation to knowing and becoming the kind of school that allows children to have meaningful learning opportunities, a school’s journey can communicate some vital parts of that story in relation to its culture, identity, values, and norms. This paper focuses on one school that has been inspired by the Reggio approach yet has veered carefully away from the notion of “being Reggio.” This apparent contradiction coincides
with the Reggio Emilia Early Childhood Centers’ philosophy that has the dual emphasis that no one else can “be Reggio” yet one can be inspired by it and appropriate it for one’s own context.

In this paper, we explore what this dual emphasis means in two ways. One exploration examines the historical start-up of the Reggio Emilia Early Childhood Centers as a way to understand where one is headed and where others have been. The other exploration examines one public school that embarked on a quest to be inspired by the Reggio Emilia Early Childhood Center philosophy without the need to call itself a “Reggio” school. As the public school learned to do this, the teachers and principal figured out a way to appropriate ideas over time, while avoiding its becoming a “thing” that becomes prescriptive and stigmatizing. While the school was appropriating ideas, they were able to find opportunities and support for growing at different rates and for revisiting ideas in new ways. Each story is told by the principal of the school and is followed by an analysis. As the analysis unfolds, the authors add additional perspectives that become part of the reflective analyses. Finally, the authors step back to examine how all of the parts fit back into the larger picture of the school’s development and place of inspiration.

A Historical Perspective on the Reggio Emilia Approach

In the world of Reggio, Italy, the Italian Early Childhood Centers have a long history of educating their young children in ways that are somewhat different from many of the early childhood centers in the United States’ past. Only in the past 15–20 years has their approach to education been investigated by educators in the United States (Gardner, 1998). One way to understand their approach is to examine their philosophy.

Reggio Emilia is not a formal model like Montessori education, with defined methods, teacher certification stands, and accreditation process. Instead, educators in Reggio Emilia speak of their evolving “experience” and see themselves as a provocation and reference point, a way of engaging in dialogue starting from a strong and rich vision of the child. (Edwards, 2003, p. 34)

More of the Reggio Emilia Italian philosophy of teaching children is described by Carlina Rinaldi, who was one of the directors of the Early Childhood Services in Reggio Emilia, Italy. More specifically,

[Reggio Emilians value] an image of the child who experiences the world who feels a part of the world right from birth; a child who is full of curiosities, full of desire to live; a child who is full of desire and ability to communicate from the start of his or her life; a child who is fully able to create maps for his or her personal, social, cognitive, affective, and
symbolic orientation. Because of all this, a young child reacts with a competent system of abilities, learning strategies, and ways of organizing relationships. (Rinaldi, 2001, pp. 50-51)

Specifically with regards to their values of children, there is a “collective desire to present a more positive and compelling image of children than is currently held in contemporary society, with the aim of generating ‘hopes for a new human culture of childhood’” (New, 1998, pp. 278-279). In other words, “The child is the protagonist, trying to discover and understand connections, relationships, and responses, working out his or her hypotheses and involving the other children in his or her investigations” (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 54). This is in contrast to a deficit image of children where the child enters a classroom with deficient needs that the teacher needs to address through instruction. (Moss, Dillon, & Statham, 2000). Even though Rinaldi’s quote about the child as a protagonist describes the Reggio Emilian’s view of children, adults are encouraged to engage in the same kind of learning process when they are investigating the Reggio approach.

One of the most curious pieces of the Reggio approach to education has been the idea that the Reggio Emilians welcome people investigating their ways of teaching and learning; however, they do not believe that anyone else can “be Reggio.” This is explained in the following quotes.

But it can be a great mistake for us, as it was in the case of our desire to emulate the English Infant Schools, to think that we can somehow just import the Reggio experience. By reputation we are prone to look for the “quick fix.” Such an attitude would deprecate the very achievement it professes to admire. (Hawkins, 1998, p. xxi)

Importing foreign models wholesale never works; each society must solve its own problems. Educational innovations can never be transplanted from one country to another without extensive translation and adaptation. …We can expect the ideas to flow as long as they are found to be useful to others and to help them with their own problems and issues. (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, pp. 457-458)

What is done in Reggio Emilia cannot be copied with the hopes of creating an authentic educational experience for young children. Instead, you can start by asking questions and pushing your practice along the path that is Reggio-inspired. (Wurm, 2005, p. 6)
As mentioned by Edwards, Gandini, & Forman (1998) along with Wurm (2005), the Reggio Emilians do, however, encourage those who are interested in their approach to find ways to look at their essence and make it appropriate to their own context.

In order to understand one's journey, it is important to understand one's history. While the Reggio approach belongs to the Reggio Emilians, other people who are interested in it need to have an understanding of the approach's beginnings if they are to be inspired by it. Malaguzzi (1998), the founder and director of the Reggio approach, described their start. They were a new school that was secular based and city-run, as opposed to the prominent Catholic-run schools in the area. It arose after World War II in opposition to the former Fascist government. Its goal was quality learning that was not based on a custodial model and that welcomed all children. “It was a necessary change in a society that was renewing itself, changing deeply, and in which citizens and families were increasingly asking for social services and schools for their children” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 52).

Responsibilities were clear in our minds; many eyes, not all friendly, were watching us. We had to make as few errors as possible; we had to find our cultural identity quickly, make ourselves known, and win trust and respect…We knew that the new situation required continuity but also many breaks with the past. The experiences of the past we sought to preserve were the human warmth and reciprocal help…and spontaneous curiosity (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 52).

Preparing ourselves was difficult. We looked for readings; we traveled to capture ideas and suggestions from the few but precious innovative experiences of other cities; we organized seminars with friends and the most vigorous and innovative figures on the national education scene; we attempted experiments; we started exchanges with Swiss and French colleagues. (Malaguzzi, 1998, pp. 58-59).

More specifically, the Reggio Emilians examined a number of different philosophies and were inspired by them, such that they were able to find a way to make sense of them for their own context, i.e., they appropriated them. More specifically, they investigated ideas from Dewey, Vygotsky, Piaget, Ferriere, Erik Erikson, Brofenbrenner, and Bruno Ciari, to name a few. Later, the works of Jerome Kagan, Gardner, and Hawkins, and others influenced them (Malaguzzi, 1998). From these works, they were concerned with the essences and underlying meaning, as opposed to a literal interpretation. As a result, this combination and collection of philosophical works came into its own being through the Reggio Emilians’ appropriation.
Within Malaguzzi’s quotes, there are several ideas that need to be restated and elaborated on for this paper. First is the idea that there was a past that one was breaking away from so that a new identity could emerge. In hermeneutical terms, this is referred to as being thrown into the world that is historically and culturally bound (Cavalier, 2006). As one looks to the past, the future, ourselves, and others for understanding, these connections can either propel one forward or hold one back. It is through one’s reflection on the parts in relation to the whole, and back again, (i.e., through the hermeneutic circle process) that help a person to understand who one is and where one is going (Geanellos, 2000).

Second, as part of a person’s understanding himself or herself hermeneutically, a person also looks to others and to the past (Geanellos, 2000). In fact the Reggio Emilians encourage understanding through collaboration, whether it is a collaboration in the schools, with parents, in the community, or with others outside their area (Malaguzzi, 1998). When the Reggio schools began, they talked extensively with mothers, friends, innovative figures, and colleagues, thus engaging in social constructivism, collaboration, and exchange. While this invited the opportunity for different perspectives and socio-cognitive conflicts to emerge, it is precisely those differences that the Reggio Emilians valued for growth opportunities (Malaguzzi, 1998). As a result of their own learning, this became a defining process that they encouraged their children to undertake when taking on a project. While this process of learning over time was originally cast for their own learning and for their children’s learning, it can apply equally as well to those who are learning about a Reggio approach. Without this type of exchange between oneself and others, over time, there is a naivety or narrow way of understanding (Geanellos, 2000).

The point here is not only that we need to allow children [or adults] to approach the material in their own time, but also that all children [adults] needed one another as part of the exploration, to construct their own meanings…Learning does not unfold in a linear fashion. All the children [or adults] have their own meandering paths that collide into one another, pushing each other forward, backward, and sideways. Ultimately they arrive, but each in their own time. In Reggio this is respected and cultivated. (Würm, 2005, pp. 57-58).

With the idea of social constructivism comes the challenge of validation that refers to a desire to negotiate a shared understanding that incorporates reasoning and works to arbitrate competing interpretations. As a result, validation is contrary to verification that involves a seeking of the one truth in interpretation or implementation (Geanellos, 2000). However, from a hermeneutical perspective, which fits nicely with the Reggio approach, this negotiated process of learning is ongoing. Specifically,
Hermeneutics does not seek nor desire interpretive consensus since this suggests singular, static notions of knowledge which would silence debates over understanding. As Gadamer (1989, 579) reminds us, “the ongoing dialogue permits no final conclusion. It would be poor a hermeneuticist who thought he or she could have, or had to have, the last word.” (Geanellos, 2000, p. 116)

Third, in conjunction with learning about oneself with others through social constructivism, Malaguzzi (1998) points out that the Reggio Emilians looked at readings and attempted experiments. In other words, they also engaged in a collaborative action research process (New, 1998). As they did these investigations, there was a process involved in learning about their identity, i.e., who they were, who they wanted to become, what they valued, how they valued others, and how they wanted to approach issues of learning, all of which are also hermeneutic in nature (Cavalier, 2006).

Appreciation of the dialectic between understanding and interpretation allows them to see that repeated engagement with a text is necessary if premature interpretive closure is to be forestalled. Deeper understanding of a text requires time if naïve interpretation is to receive an opportunity for enlightenment (of self and text). (Geanellos, 2000, p. 114)

To summarize, it is important to know the process that the Reggio Emilians went through so that others can understand what the Reggio Emilians mean when they encourage educators to appropriate what they have learned from them. In other words, Malaguzzi and his teachers did not set about trying to find a particular program to implement or to expect a journey without difficulties. Instead, they embarked on a process of developing a community of learners, where all people (children, teachers, and other educators) are valued and supported in the learning process so that knowledge and understanding can be optimized. As other educators look to the Reggio Emilians (and other Reggio-inspired groups) for inspiration, they are welcomed into the folds of this community of learners who are willing to investigate what it means to value learners through the process of learning. As a result, there comes the realization that “there is more to be gained by understanding Reggio Emilian interpretations of early childhood education, both ideological and practical, than will be accomplished by direct emulation of their practices” (New, 1998, p. 261).

Introduction

Authors’ Role

In our study, the history of the school was recounted by the principal during four interviews with the first author. It was assumed that the information the principal shared was a result of “lived time” where the lived time represents the idea that some time is more meaningful.
than others (Dauenhauer, 2005). In relation to the story identification and construction, the role of the first author in this study was to identify stories from the interview transcripts. The stories were then constructed from the words of the second author (the principal) but reordered by the first author so that the same topics across the four interviews were combined into one story. In other words, one of the goals in the actual writing of each story was to keep the principal’s words primarily intact, with minor changes to words so that it was readable with regard to tense, pronouns, and transitions. Through the selection and reconstruction of the interviews, the “interviews are the voice of both interviewer and interviewee, i.e., a co-creation” (Geanellos, 2000, p. 117). Then, the second author’s role was to assist in the verification of the story construction and to elaborate where necessary.

The stories that were chosen for this paper illustrate the challenges of the second author’s school in exploring the Reggio Emilian approach to teaching. In the analyses that follow each story, both authors pursue a hermeneutical examination of the story. In this examination, exact meanings of the school and cases were not the goal. Instead, in the spirit of learning about the Reggio approach, the stories were meant to be interpreted hermeneutically, by considering a variety of perspectives and using those perspectives to make sense of the school’s history (Geanellos, 2000).

**The School’s Context in General**

The following stories explore the origins and development of the Lakota Early Childhood Center in West Chester, Ohio. This early childhood center is part of a large district with 17,000 students, and in 2005, it was the seventh or eighth largest district in Ohio and the largest suburban district. When the principal was interviewed, the center had just finished its eighth year at this school. Its building was one wing of the old high school. The high school was split into two high schools, and the freshman school moved in next door. Seven of the ten elementary schools had their kindergarten teachers moved to the Lakota Early Childhood Center. Then, all of the preschool special education classes came. In the first year, there were about 16 kindergarten teachers and 6 different preschool teachers. The district experienced continued growth and now serves around 1,300 preschool and kindergarten children. For the 2005–2006 school year, it had 44 sections of kindergarten and 20 sections of preschool. Yet, eight additional sections of preschool were held at another elementary school because the school was out of space.

When the school opened, kindergarten and preschool teachers were brought together in this new, early childhood center of preschool and kindergarten. Their previous elementary schools had very different cultures of learning and teaching. And the teachers themselves had vastly different backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and instructional strategies. As a result, the principal stated that they quickly had to pull some things together from a common standpoint, i.e., from an academic standpoint.
Study Group Context and Growth as Recounted by the Principal

After we started to get things together from an academic standpoint, we started to look at some other things that we knew that were more important or as important that we were missing out on. That was when we started looking at, “How do we make learning meaningful in preschool and kindergarten classrooms?” So it’s one thing to have effective literacy practice; it’s another thing for that to be in a more meaningful context with children. So we set up optional study groups for the school to look into this.

Over the years, we’ve had tremendous participation. Our study group began to grow. So what was 12 people became 20, became 30 people. A couple of years ago, we had 65 people or so, which no longer is really a study group. So then we tried to break things down into some smaller subgroups.

Now, we have five to six [study groups going] at any given time. And then recently four or five of those focused on some kind of Reggio connection. I don’t think we have anyone in our school who hasn’t been a part of a study group over the last couple of years. Everyone isn’t involved every time, but generally we have people who want to be involved in more study groups than they have time for.

This is a school where everyone is growing; we don’t have any classrooms where people are the same as they were last year or three years ago in how they address the children. We have some people whose growth and change has just been off the charts. Other people are making much slower, more gradual change over time, and that’s fine, because we’ve tried to look at change from a “time” standpoint. We’re not looking at a drastic change overnight, but we’re trying to support change over time.

In order to get to more meaningful types of thinking with teachers, that takes time. It is the same way that we look at learning experiences with children; we can’t get into deeper levels of thinking in a one-week theme or a two-week theme. It takes a long period of time to really be able to get to deeper levels of thinking. [As a result,] I think we discuss and look at pretty high-level issues from the teachers’ standpoint. We wouldn’t be able to do that if we were just kind of hopping from one thing to the next, year after year.
The paper’s theme of “Are we there yet?” refers to the school’s journey of being inspired by the Reggio approach in relation to the development of its own identity through appropriation. In this case, the school refers primarily to the teachers and their approaches to learning that they are establishing at the school and in their classrooms. However, the school’s exploration of what it means to be Reggio-inspired meant different things at different times in the school’s history. More specifically, this exploration about being Reggio-inspired is not about a specific goal in time and in its achievement. The school’s exploration of being Reggio-inspired is an ongoing process that demands observers to look at the process in relative terms of time. As a result, this paper is about the school’s being or presence in the world, with particular emphasis on its exploration about what it meant to explore a Reggio approach and develop its own identity over time.

From a hermeneutical (i.e., relative) perspective (Cavalier, 2006), Lakota Early Childhood Center is on the journey about realizing its “being-in-the-world.” Its “being” in one sense is its new presence in the public schools of Ohio in which it has been “thrown into the world” with a new, consolidated emphasis on early childhood. On the other hand, a different extension of “being” suggests that it will develop its own awareness of who it is in this new school culture and philosophy of teaching and learning. The following quote from the principal captures this theme and will be developed further in the two stories that follow.

Theme: “We know that the only Reggio school is in Reggio. So there are some things that we’ve done to try to think about how we talk about it or where those types of practices fit in with what we’re trying to do from an early childhood standpoint.” (as recounted by the principal)

**Story 1: The Tendency to Appropriate a “Thing”**

In the second year, we began looking at, “How could we make learning meaningful in the preschool and kindergarten classrooms?” So we started off with a project approach study group of about 12 people or so [that also included explorations of Reggio-type projects. Since then the number of study groups and participation has grown tremendously.]. A little later, we wanted to figure out how could we talk about a teaching approach in a way that it wouldn’t become a “thing.” It happens all the time in education, whether it’s writing workshop, whether it’s Reggio, whether it’s a project approach, whatever it may be. I think there’s a real danger in it becoming a “thing.”
1. *The thing of becoming canned with the pitfall of eclipsing the original intent.* There’s the danger that as soon as it becomes a “thing,” then it’s “Why I can just do these steps. And this is how.” It takes out the teacher decision-making. Instead, it should be about what decisions do I make as a teacher to help the students develop their thinking.

2. *The thing of becoming a label as a way to fit in with the pitfall of conforming vs. advancing.* [Secondly, for other teachers the “thing” becomes something that they say or do because] there’s that desire to want to make sure they fit in with everyone well. They want to make sure that they’re not seen as someone separate, i.e., that these are Reggio classrooms and these aren’t. I really don’t care what they call it. I’m interested in what type of learning experience those children are having.

3. *The thing of being too unfamiliar and overwhelming with the pitfall of not being ready to change.* [Finally, other teachers see it as an overwhelming “thing” because it is so different from what they know and understand.] Some teachers, after they do a site visit, they all of sudden think, “Wait a second. I’m here, and I have to get there. Man, that’s overwhelming.” Now there’s some people that can be inspired by that and move quickly. But for most people, it’s very understandable when you look at how difficult real change is; people are hesitant of that. It can be challenging and intimidating. So that’s another time when people will shy away from the use of the word “Reggio” or from “projects.”

**Analysis of Story 1**

**Interpretation of Thingness and Pitfalls**

The idea that a teaching approach could become a “thing,” was a real issue at the school. The implication is that when one appropriates ideas, there is a danger of encountering natural pitfalls of thingness. The question becomes, “Do we focus on or end up at a pitfall? Or could there be a catalyst and vehicle that propels the thingness to a new, more meaningful process of learning?” In order to understand the “things” from the story better, we will be examining them with the hermeneutical ideas of appropriation and distanciation. Respectively, appropriation focuses on making something unfamiliar become familiar so that it becomes one’s own; whereas, distanciation frees the idea from the original intentions in order for it to develop a life of its own through appropriation (Geanellos, 2000).
Pitfall 1. While appropriation is touted as desirable in the learning approach, one pitfall of trying to appropriate and distanciate an idea is that it can eclipse the original intention (Geanellos, 2000). In the case of story 1, the concern was that it could lead to an idea's becoming canned or recipe-like. This is not always the case with eclipsing the intention; in some instances, it can be very freeing. But what it means, with regard to the "thingness of becoming canned," is that the appropriations were based on an initial understanding that was naïve and superficial (Geanellos, 2000), as the principal eluded to in the story. Johnson (1999) and Wright (2000) referred to this naïve appropriation as a possible Disneyfication, where the naïveté was intermixed with the seduction of something different and glamorous.

Pitfall 2. A second pitfall of appropriation involved the "thing of needing to fit in." The danger here is in the motivation and focus; the pitfall's emphasis is on conforming as opposed to finding ways for the ideas to help advance one's thinking (Hewett, 2001) through appropriation. Johnson (1999) described this as "searching for yet another Utopic way of social order" (p. 71). He states that we are lured to become something else, appropriate or not. He then suggests that this resembles "the notion of fanaticism. In our fanatic attempt to become the 'other' — THE Reggio teacher, like THE now infamous multicultural teacher, who replaced THE whole language teacher, who replaced THE Vygotskian teacher, who replaced THE DAP teacher, who replaced THE constructivist teacher, who replaced THE ..." (p. 74).

Fleer (2003) takes a slightly different perspective about the pitfall of fitting in. She specifically targets what the hermeneutics call the idea of fixation, where the words and meanings battle for importance. Fleer states, "Indeed, it is difficult for anyone to communicate effectively within the profession without the appropriate knowledge of the discourse. Those who do not master the language of the practice are positioned as 'not being early childhood'" (p. 65). From Fleer's perspective, one's fitting in is a necessary component for the field. However, the goal is not to replicate the thinking or words but to advance the thinking through meaning-making. So she cautions against "fitting in" in a canned, naïve way. Instead, Fleer (2003) recommends that, "In order to move forward, we need to look back and analyze what we have inherited. We also need to reify new cultural tools... and give these terms meaning so that we can think differently and change our 'community of practice'...In this sense we move beyond social reproduction" (Fleer, 2003, p. 77). Geanellos (2000) adds, "Interpretive understanding opens up the possibility of seeing things differently and of orienting oneself in other ways in the world" (p. 114), which is why the second pitfall did not stop the teachers and principal from trying to understand it through practice.

Pitfall 3: The third pitfall associated with appropriation is the readiness to engage in a conceptual change regarding teaching or learning based upon one's past and connected
with what one is learning. One interpretation of the “thing as being overwhelmed” issue may be that the teachers’ initial ways of thinking were interfering or resisting the new ways of thinking in their new school, making it overwhelming; however, it is important to note that they do not have to be constrained by their past ways of thinking. Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle (1993) describe this by the following paradox. “A paradox exists for the learner; on the one hand, current conceptions potentially constitute momentum that resists conceptual change, but they also provide frameworks that the learner can use to interpret and understand new, potentially conflicting information” (Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993, p. 170).

According to Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle (1993), conceptual change specifically refers to a process of learning that involves four conditions for change. The first one is dissatisfaction with one’s current beliefs. The second condition is that the idea has to be intelligible, i.e., understandable. The third is that it needs to be plausible such that one understands how it can be applied. The final condition is that it must appear fruitful. In other words, it must be able to explain what is happening or suggest new possibilities for investigation.

More specifically, “the term ‘conceptual change’ is used to characterized the kind of learning required when the new information to be learned comes in conflict with the learners’ prior knowledge usually acquired on the basis of everyday experiences. It is claimed that in these situations, a major reorganization of prior knowledge is required — a conceptual change” (Vosniadou & Verschaffel, 2004, p. 445). And conceptual change is impacted by different personal, motivation, social, and historical aspects (Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993).

**Interpretation of Moving Beyond Thingness and Its Pitfalls**

While the pitfalls of the “things” were a natural occurrence that could not be prevented, it is important to examine how the pitfalls and thingness were addressed at the school. The information that will be used in this section will refer to both the study group context section and the story.

With regards to the thing of being canned, even an initial exposure that is naive has the potential to provide the teachers with an entry point so that they can “wet their whistle.” However, the school did not leave it there. Following this, the teachers had multiple opportunities to engage in a variety of study groups over time, so that the limits in their understanding could be revised and expanded. In this case, when the start was used as a catalyst to begin the process of learning rather than a destination, the study groups became the vehicle that could help propel those teachers past the pitfalls. As Geanellos (2000) stated, “Repeated engagement with a text is necessary if premature interpretive closure is to be forestalled. Deeper understanding of a text requires time if
naïve interpretation is to receive an opportunity for enlightenment (of self and text)” (p. 114). In this way, the study groups, as configured for this school, allowed the teachers one way to “participate in the act of doing philosophy” rather than “blindly accepting handed down slogans and beliefs” (Hewett, 2001, p. 98).

With regard to one’s conforming or fitting in, the principal chose not to attend to the teachers’ labels and their implications. Instead, the principal chose to go beyond the surface designations and look at the deeper structure of what the teachers were doing and the processes that the teachers and students were engaging in. In other words, it is possible that the principal saw the designation as irrelevant when he saw a teaching-and-learning process that was motivating and engaging in a meaningful way. The designation was irrelevant for this principal, because his insight into the process is what matters when it comes to his mentoring the teacher to a deeper understanding.

What this all means is that the need to fit in has the potential again to be a catalyst for the teachers to do something in a professional way that could continue to be built on, according to Fleer (2003). In other words, the label could provide a catalyst or indication for the principal to look beyond the rhetoric to see what was actually happening to see what can be advanced.

Finally, with regards to the teachers’ readiness, some of the teachers were overwhelmed at first. If the teachers were left in a state of being overwhelmed, then their appropriation destination would end in a pitfall. However, even the overwhelming affect has the potential to be a catalyst that could bring time, patience, and persistence to the fore as another vehicle to complement the study groups and allow each person to change and grow in the learning process. As a result of their learning at different rates, the teachers began to see the fruitfulness of needing to change and grow.

While the school has successfully addressed the natural pitfalls of appropriation in small ways as just described, the school decided to take a look, in story 2, at how it could move beyond the pitfalls of thingness in a broader way.

**Story 2: Appropriation That Doesn’t Become a “Thing”**

[To avoid or minimize its becoming more of a “thing”), we began looking at those study groups in a way that wasn’t as “Reggio” focused. What we began talking about was “What are those things that are important from an intellectual standpoint?”

A couple of years ago, that led to our identifying the intellectual dispositions that we value, in particular, from an early childhood standpoint. We started off with a list of probably 30 or so habits of mind, 30 or so intellectual dispositions. We combined some, narrowed them
down, and ended up with seven. We didn’t want just a couple. We didn’t want a list of 20. So these are the seven dispositions that we have that we just felt were particularly important — problem solving, questioning, intellectual creativity, persistence, thinking independently, intellectual risk taking, and keen observation.

We then can say that there are a number of different ways that we can work towards those dispositions. Reggio-inspired practices certainly do that; they really focus on those types of things. This is the realm that we can talk about intellectual dispositions and what we value as a school. Everyone can put it in their [professional] log and say, “Yeah, we support this without it becoming a ‘thing’ of Reggio-type projects.”

Analysis of Story 2

Where Has the Emphasis Been?

Story 1 was about finding ways to focus on meaningful learning and figuring out ways to take the school to the next level of learning. Story 2 illustrates how the school did not leave the advances to be executed in a piecemeal kind of way. Instead, the school wanted to move into a more comprehensive and deeper way of thinking and being; they wanted something stronger to anchor their thinking around their vision of “meaningful learning.”

Changing the Emphasis to Enable a Different Change

As a result, the school changed some of its emphasis to enable more change. When it comes to learning from the Reggio approach, many schools in the United States look to the Reggio approach for inspiration on the curriculum, environment, documentation, or participation of its stakeholders (New, 2000). However, this school did not. Instead, the school chose a more unique way to understand things by focusing more on the intellectual dispositional learning. Interestingly, the school did not explicitly try to disembed the dispositions in the Reggio approach, but the dispositions that it chose to address school-wide are dispositions that are represented implicitly in the Reggio approach. In addition, this emphasis can be partly attributed to the school’s inspiration from Katz’s work on dispositions and the project approach.

What’s the Difference?: What Have Other People Found?

For this school, there was something different and more powerful about focusing on the intellectual dispositions than on the other aspects more commonly studied about the Reggio approach. So the question becomes, “Why does it make sense? What is more interesting about this?” First of all, it is interesting from a conceptual aspect regarding
dispositions. While there are many definitions and facets to intellectual dispositions, the
definition that fits the story is the idea of mindfulness, where “mindful thinkers tend to
create new categories, or simply ‘pay attention’ to given contexts; they tend to be open to
new information; and they tend to cultivate an awareness of more than one perspective”
(Tishman & Andrade, 1995, p. 4). It was as if they were taking Tishman, Jay, & Perkins’
(1993) advice when they focused on dispositions.

If we want to teach students to be good thinkers, we need to ask how well
a standard model of teaching…serves the agenda of teaching thinking
dispositions, and whether enlargements can be made on this model to
make it more effective. (Tishman, Jay, & Perkins, 1993, p. 149)

In addition, in their study groups and then back to their classrooms, the school
was engaging in its own mindfulness and creating a culture of thinking. With this kind
of culture, there were inclinations, sensitivities, and abilities that could be fostered for
dispositional learning. Without this kind of culture, people often fail to use the thinking
skills that they have (Tishman, Jay, & Perkins, 1993). Also by focusing on the intellectual
dispositions and establishing a culture in which to develop and utilize the dispositions, they
will be able to further their processes of learning, content knowledge, and product quality
in a way that focusing on just content or procedural knowledge can’t (Katz, 1999).

When we look to other fields such as mathematics education, it is also suggested that
it’s important to develop meaningful dispositional learning:

There is now rather general agreement that the ultimate goal of student learning
is the acquisition of a mathematical disposition rather than of a set of isolated
concepts and skills. (De Corte, Verschaffel, & Op’T Eynde, 2000, p. 687)

Polya, a well-known mathematician, (1969) states,

This is the general aim of mathematics teaching — to develop in each
student as much as possible the good mental habits of tackling any kind
of problem. You should develop the whole personality of the student and
mathematics teaching should especially develop thinking. Mathematics
teaching could also develop clarity and staying power. It could also
develop character to some extent but most important is the development
of thinking. My point of view is that the most important part of
thinking that is developed in mathematics is the right attitude in tackling
problems, in treating problems. (Part II, pp. 5–7)

Even the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 1989) has stated
specific dispositions of learning mathematics that include confidence, flexibility,
perseverance, interest, inventiveness, appreciation, reflection, and monitoring. 

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In mathematics, when the emphasis has been on the learning of strategies, students have not developed as deep of an understanding as when the teacher emphasizes conceptual understanding in the beginning. Now, the field is moving to emphasize intellectual dispositions. As a result, with the emphasis on the intellectual dispositions, the students will also develop meaningful ways of thinking, observing, and working along with a conceptual understanding. It is an emphasis on the process of learning where learning continues to move forward, as opposed to just reaching a destination of certain knowledge or skills.

When the teacher fixes his attention exclusively on such matters as these [the acquisition of skills and knowledge], the process of forming underlying and permanent habits, attitudes, and interests is overlooked. Yet the formation of the latter is more important for the future (Dewey, 1933, p. 57-58).

**What Are the Concerns?**

Because this school has taken a different approach to being inspired by the Reggio approach, it is important to consider if the school may be forsaking the Reggio approach, i.e., engaging in too much distanciation. There are several ideas that may allay this concern. One is that the school’s mission was never about “adopting” the approach as is or even adopting the approach with revisions. Instead, it was about being inspired by the approach. It was about being respectful, reflexive, and intentional in how one uses what one is learning from the Reggio Emilians.

The second is that as one explores dispositions, one begins to understand something in a different way, because the dispositions allow multiple ways to address it. Through these different ways of understanding, persons have the potential to be enriched, whether they agree initially or not. So it’s not about growing towards Reggio, but it is about growing as a result of engaging in the learning process. Interestingly, the principal never said that the school was growing towards Reggio, only that it was growing in its meaningful learning.

Thirdly, the Reggio Emilians are about finding and implementing ways to do what one believes and not just talk about it. Because dispositions are about the embodiment of what one believes, thinks, and does, it is most appropriate to engage in an exploration of dispositions. As a result, this emphasis is not forsaking the Reggio approach. In fact, this sounds a lot like what Malaguzzi refers to as creativity, where “creativity is not a separate mental faculty but rather a characteristic ‘way of thinking, knowing, and making choices’” (New, 2000, p. 350).
Going Back to the Message of Reggio in a Different Way

As this paper has engaged in various ways of understanding the Reggio approach and how one school has been inspired by it, it is necessary to go back to the message of the Reggio Emilians in a different way now. As the teachers make their understanding their own, i.e., appropriate it, they begin to enter the hermeneutic circle. When they enter the circle, they look at both the parts in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to its parts (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). More specifically, in relationship to a Reggio approach and inspiration, the hermeneutical circle describes the natural process for the teachers to look at the parts of a Reggio approach and then look at it in relation to their own context or school. As the teachers begin to examine their own context, they will again be drawn into revisiting a Reggio approach. “This renewed understanding of self allows a return to the text with an expanded horizon from which to understand it” (Geanellos, 2000, p. 114). As the horizon expands, the journey continues with a spiraling towards further inspiration, appropriation, distanciation, and change. The thing that is “most important about the Reggio Emilia approach is its collaborative vision of participating adults who jointly co-construct over time a common image of teaching and learning, and who realize that no current construction is ever final” (Edwards, 1995, p. 7).

The Whole Picture of Story 1 and 2

As we move now into thinking about the whole context of the school’s journey, we can see that the first story began with the school’s moving from a constrained perspective of seeing the approach as a “thing,” to a perspective that moves past some of the natural pitfalls of appropriation. Another perspective suggests that the story moves from knowing who one was as a teacher, to appropriating who one is “supposed to be” or not to be, in order to make sense about what the approach means in relationship to who one was and who one could become. The second story continued to highlight the school’s explorations and inspirations by focusing on the distanciation process that led to different kinds of dispositional lenses for understanding.

The Whole Picture of the Question “Are We There Yet?”

So “Are we there yet?” If there is any way to arrive at “being Reggio,” then it is to become inspired as the Reggio Emilians have. In other words, one needs to encourage his or her learners, i.e., children or adults, to engage in a similar social constructivist, action research, community of learners process. This process will enable one to explore the kinds of values, identity, and processes of learning that one wants to advance or appropriate in order to gain knowledge, understanding, and ways of being with others. On the other hand, one will never fully arrive at “being” Reggio. More specifically, if one truly embraces the learning process described in his or her history, then there is no
final destination; it’s an ongoing process. So the “there” in the question, “Are we there yet?” may be deemed irrelevant. However, if the “there” is viewed as a malleable trajectory where the familiar can become unfamiliar and the unfamiliar becomes familiar; where the known ways of teaching and learning become foreign and foreign ways of being in the classroom become known, then a dialectical interpretation can provide one with an ongoing way to make sense of one’s relative place in being inspired by the Reggio approach (Geanellos, 2000).

References


