

Artists at the Centre

Artists at the Centre is a project funded by the *Hamilton Community Foundation* and the *Ontario Trillium Foundation*, with significant contribution from the Art Gallery of Hamilton. It brings artists into day care centres in Hamilton Ontario Canada, where the early childhood educators are exploring the Reggio Emilia approach.

The Journey

The educators in Reggio Emilia invite us to think with them about the ideas they have formulated and to find ways to make sense of them in our own culture. This is not a curriculum model or recipe. It is a worldview. We cannot *have* it here the way we can have a fast food franchise virtually anywhere we see fit to hang the shingle. Our culture is different. Our questions and possibilities are different. What we can do is to incline toward it – to think about the quality of the aesthetic experiences we provide for children and the beauty of the environment of their classroom, about how we view children, how we view time, how we value art and learning and teaching and collaboration.

The adults and children involved in the *Artists at the Centre* project have had the pleasure of thinking, playing, talking, learning, and inventing together. During the course of this project, we have come to realize:

- that children do, in fact, have many languages that adults can nurture and in the process rediscover some of their own;
- that we teach best when we are learning;
- that we are on a journey. The documentation panels show growth and transformation. We are not “there” – we will always be on our way, revisiting where we’ve been and changing our route and relishing the joy of meandering;
- that we benefit from thinking together about how we view children, creativity, and education.

The gifts of the protagonists

The artists have brought their keen sense of colour, line, texture and aesthetics, and knowledge of art media. A fundamental reason for putting artists and children together is that when they work together, the children learn skills and forms of awareness that occur only in the arts. They learn about the life of the imagination, how to be keen observers and appreciators of experience. “Young children and artists do share some common ways of experiencing the world around them. They ask questions, explore materials and are responsive to the rich visual and sensory world around them. Artists and young children are serious investigators and players. This comparison is not to suggest that artists are young children but that there are common characteristics that can be nurtured in childhood” (Tarr, 1995).

The teachers have added their gifts of insight into children's interests and questions. They practice what Carol Anne Wien (1998) has described as "a pedagogy of listening". The children have brought their joie de vivre, curiosity, and desire to represent. The documentation of this collaboration is not merely an archive of what has been done, but rather a means by which conversations and hypotheses and reactions can be revisited. Art helps us to reconsider, re-examine, re-cognize.

Time

Time is another of the gifts included in this journey. Taking the time to look closely and draw, paint, mould or construct encourages thoughtfulness. Revisiting an earlier representation with others allows for reflection. Listening to and collaborating with others brings richness, complexity, conflict, and resolution. "Make no mistake, the curriculum we prescribe for schools and the time we allocate to subjects show children what adults believe is important for them to learn" (Eisner, 1992). In this project, children's interests were pursued in depth. A project could go on for months. They were encouraged to represent their understandings in many ways, to spend time looking at others' work, and to talk about and elaborate upon and play with their ideas. There was no rush.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE REGGIO APPROACH*

The child as protagonist. Children are viewed as strong, rich, and capable; as having preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, negotiating with everything their environment brings to them.

This was the initial provocation – from this, some programs began looking critically at the rules they had for children, and reduced them to the essentials of not hurting self or others or damaging things. They began making decisions about curriculum based on children's interests rather than on a predetermined weekly theme. We began asking ourselves to try to articulate our view of children and to have that be reflected in what we do.

The child as collaborator. Education has to focus on each child in relation to other children, the family, the teachers, and the community rather than on each child in isolation. There is an emphasis on work in small groups. This practice is based on the social constructivist model that supports the idea that we form ourselves through our interaction with peers, adults, things in the world, and symbols.

This is an integral aspect of the Reggio approach. When this is embraced, children are involved in discussions and decisions about curriculum and environment. The impact of this in our programs was a significant increase in the number of collaborative art projects, many of which went on for weeks or months. Collaboration among adults also became a central feature of our project. A community of learners developed. During the early days, free professional development sessions were well attended by educators in the

community. We began holding these sessions in the centres, and saw a great generosity of spirit as challenges and growth were shared and celebrated. The teachers in our project became enthusiastic collaborators, both within their programs, and with others in the community. The collaboration deepened with the introduction of the artists. The teachers and artists also held free professional development sessions for the larger community. Collaboration is not without its challenges. We are learning to embrace these as opportunities to learn from each other.

The child as communicator. This approach fosters children's intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation, including words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, and music, which leads children to surprising levels of communication, symbolic skills, and creativity. Children have the right to use many materials in order to discover and communicate what they know, understand, wonder about, question, feel, and imagine. In this way, they make their thinking visible through their many natural "languages". A studio teacher, (*atelierista*) trained in the visual arts, works closely with children and teachers to enable children to explore many materials and to use a great number of languages to make their thinking visible.

One impact of this was with regard to the choices of art materials. *There was realization that the children needed good quality materials – fine markers, real clay, charcoal. When we slowed down our pace, there was time to spend elaborating on a drawing, and translating ideas to another "language". The artists are not "teaching art lessons", but rather helping the children to be articulate with the various media. We have revisited the ECE mantra "It's the process, not the product". It's the process and the product. We have learned much about children's competence, given the opportunity and support. We hope to further develop other languages too – music, movement, puppetry, drama, and construction.*

The environment as third teacher. The design and use of space encourage encounters, communication, and relationships. There is an underlying order and beauty in the design and organization of all the space in a school and the equipment and materials within it. Every corner of every space has an identity and a purpose, is rich in potential to engage and to communicate, and is valued and cared for by children and adults.

For many programs, this was a starting point. *The desire was to make the rooms more home-like, and more beautiful. There was increased use of natural and incandescent light. Decisions were based on the belief that children deserve to be in a beautiful place, and that they should not be condescended to. Parents became involved, and the results were quickly evident. Storage space for long-term projects is a challenge. So is wall space for documentation! Time is a significant element also. We have slowed down the pace, provided larger blocks of time for children, and revisited*

earlier ideas rather than moving on to something new. As a result, some of the projects have carried on for four months.

The teacher as partner, provocateur, nurturer, and guide. Teachers facilitate and provoke children's exploration of themes, work on short- and long-term projects and guide experiences of joint, open-ended discovery and problem solving. To know how to plan and proceed with their work, teachers listen and observe children closely. Teachers ask questions; discover children's ideas, hypotheses, and theories; and provide occasions for discovery and learning.

This is a challenging element – it flies in the face of our experience of “teacher” as the one who knows the answers. Becoming a co-learner has resulted in teachers and children together formulating questions and doing research. There are more “information books” and even use of internet in the classrooms. Teachers can also “throw the ball” – introduce an idea for possible exploration. Answers are not given, but rather situations are provided that allow the children to construct knowledge.

The teacher as researcher. Teachers work in pairs and maintain strong, collegial relationships with all other teachers and staff; they engage in continuous discussion and interpretation of their work and the work of children. These exchanges provide ongoing training and theoretical enrichment. Teachers see themselves as researchers preparing documentation of their work with children, whom they also consider researchers. The team is further supported by a *pedagogista* (pedagogical coordinator) who serves a group of schools.

The teachers are engaged in learning with and from each other and the children about how to be the best educators they can be. Gaining comfort with conflict is part of this. We are experimenting with having a “virtual pedagogista” role by inviting the educators to e-mail documentation to the program coordinators, both professors of Early Childhood Education, for response, to allow a broader circle of collaboration. The sustained dialogue within the centres provides tremendous support to ECE students and new team members. We continue to experiment with ideas, recognizing that there is no formula, but rather that we must reflect on our practice in light of our view of the child.

The documentation as communication. Careful consideration and attention are given to the presentation of the thinking of the children and the adults who work with them. Teachers' commentary on the purposes of the study and the children's learning process, transcription of children's verbal language (i.e. words and dialogue), photographs of their activity, and representations of their thinking in many media are composed in carefully designed panels or books to present the process of learning in the schools. The documentation serves many purposes. It makes parents aware of their children's experience. It allows teachers to better understand children, to evaluate their own work, and to exchange ideas with other educators. Documentation also shows children that

their work is valued. Finally, it creates an archive that traces the history of the school and the pleasure in the process of learning experienced by many children and their teachers.

***This part is absolutely pivotal.** It calls on us to be excellent listeners. It requires us to develop a whole new set of skills – eg. photographer, videographer, stenographer, display artist. The artists have helped immensely with this. Samples are shown below.*

The parent as partner. Parent participation is considered essential and takes many forms. Parents play an active part in their children's learning experience and help ensure the welfare of all the children in the school. The ideas and skills that the families bring to the school and, even more important, the exchange of ideas between parents and teachers, favour the development of a new way of educating, which helps teachers to view the participation of families not as a threat but as an intrinsic element of collegiality and as the integration of different wisdoms.

Webs-in-the-works show one way in which this is made visible.

When teachers and children are exploring a topic for a project, they create a web to show what they do know (or think they know) and what they want to know. These are displayed on the classroom door for parents' input. The teachers', artists', and parents' reflections we have gathered show that all feel deeply connected to this journey.

The exhibit at the Art Gallery of Hamilton in February – March 2002 was a record-breaking success. The catalogue is lasting record of the courage and dedication the teachers and artists brought to this project. And the quality of the children's work is evidence of the success. We aren't there. The exhibit was in many ways like a family portrait, with programs at various stages of development. We are now expanding, and incorporating more programs, family resource centres, home child care, research, our Children's Museum, and perhaps a video.

**excerpts from Louise Boyd Cadwell's book, Bringing Reggio Emilia Home (1997). Columbia University: Teachers College Press.*