Can We Adapt the Philosophies and Practices of Reggio Emilia, Italy, for Use in American Schools?

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The Reggio Emilia preschools in Italy have much to offer U.S. early childhood practitioners and administrators. Nevertheless, we need to be aware of some of the difficulties in attempting to transport or adapt educational models from European roots to American educational settings. The three components that constitute the differences between European and American settings are (1) patterns of thinking, (2) attitudes within the macrosociety, and (3) cultural conventions. Moreover, preschool and primary school teachers and administrators all have an enabling role to play in establishing a more effective and meaningful transition from preschool to elementary schools.

KEY WORDS: Reggio Emilia; early childhood; curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, early childhood educators and researchers around the globe have expressed interest in the preschool programs (for ages 3–6) of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Many Americans have become aware of these quality preschools of Reggio Emilia as a result of two events: *Newsweek*’s (1991) feature of Reggio Emilia as offering "the best preschools in the world", (p. 51) and “The Hundred Languages of Children,” an exhibition of children’s work from Reggio Emilia, Italy, currently traveling nationwide.

The model presented by the Reggio Emilia centers and preschools is one of cooperation and collaboration among adults as well as children. Parents and other community members are involved in school decision-making processes through their participation in school-based parent–teacher boards, as well as on community-wide committees that report to the town council. Through this active involvement, parents and teachers have formed a powerful partnership that enables a more thorough exploration of each child’s interests and strengths. In addition, this parent–school cooperation creates a strong sense of community among the adults involved.

The underpinnings for the psychosophy of Reggio Emilian preschools is best described as that of a constructivist learning theory. Constructivists state that children construct their knowledge and values from interactions with, and actions on, the physical and social world.

Some difficulties in attempting to transplant or adopt educational models or approaches from European roots are established in the differences between the American and European (1) patterns of thinking, (2) attitudes within the macrosociety, and (3) cultural conventions. In other words, given the differences between the two cultures, can the Reggio Emilia approach be effectively implemented in the United States? Before describing the elements of the Reggio Emilia preschool model–approach–theory that I believe are adaptable to American elementary school settings, I will provide a few pertinent examples of the differences between the American and European patterns of thinking, attitudes within the macrosociety, and cultural conventions that are the standards of behavior most often found in these cultures.

PATTERNS OF THINKING

Americans are somewhat distrustful of theories which seem remote from some kind of application. Over
time, Americans have been consistently pressed to show the utility of ideas and theories. An example of this distrust of theories without direct, obvious application is our limited understanding, and faint endorsement, of the social constructivist theoretical framework of Vygotsky, Issacs, and Wertssch. This theoretical paradigm contends that knowledge and knowing have their origins in social interaction and engagements. Social constructionist theory is the very foundation of the Reggio Emilia approach. Americans are likely to have difficulty accepting this theoretical construct because it is not sufficiently “practical” and not easily measured.

In their quest for new methods and technologies to solve immediate problems, many Americans have discarded the European traditions of evaluating ideas and systems of thought according to intellectual consistency or aesthetic appeal. One obvious example of the importance of aesthetic appeal in European traditions is Reggio Emilia’s (Italian) natural sense of beauty, design, function, and environmental attractiveness. Just as presentation of the visual and performing arts is considered of exceptionally high quality in Reggio Emilia, so are the display and documentation of the children’s work extraordinary. Incidentally, it was this same European tradition of beauty and order that Americans fell in love with and attempted to adopt after they observed the impressively attractive and functional displays of children’s work in the British infant and primary schools during the late 1960’s through the early 1980’s.

Americans tend to validate their theories and their ideas in two ways: application and institutionalization. For instance, in the late 1920’s and the 1930’s, the political power bases in the educational communities chose as their ultimate psychophysical vision Edward L. Thorndike and his “science of measurement” over John Dewey’s canons of child-centeredness and hands-on inquiry. This legacy continues today as the educational establishment assigns value to the single notion of intelligence quotient, grade levels of achievement, and a specific learning agenda for whole groups of children at a given age level. This orientation is evident in all too many of the mechanistically organized institutions that we call schools for children.

Americans like to think of the world as composed of facts, not ideas. Their process of thinking is generally inductive, that is, beginning with facts and proceeding to ideas. This is, of course, the converse of the thinking of the educators of Reggio Emilia. For the children of Reggio Emilia, intellectual inquiry begins with their interests, ideas, and theories. The project method, initiated by Kilpatrick in 1918 and promoted and valued by America’s John Dewey in the 1920’s, is flourishing today in Reggio Emilia. The curriculum of Reggio Emilia preschools is characterized by what Katz and Chard (1989) describe as the “project approach.”

**ATTITUDES WITHIN THE MACRO SOCIETY**

Some examples of the cultural attitude differences between the two macrocultures that affect the degree of the American adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach (microculture) are the attitudes toward the individual and the group, egalitarianism, activity, work and play, and competition.

**Attitudes Toward the Individual and the Group**

Politically and educationally, this might be the most prominent obstacle to an authentic adaptation of the Reggio Emilia model in the U.S. Individualism versus collectivism is directly related to the forms of government people choose and under which they become socialized and conditioned, that is, American constitutional democracy versus Italian social-communism. The geopolitical location of Reggio Emilia is significant, for it has been a wealthy region in Emilia Romagna for centuries. The food, wine, and political ideology traveled through Bologna to Reggio Emilia in a direct line from Genoa to Venice. Reggio Emilia is, without a doubt, the region with the most highly developed and most generally subsidized social services in all of Italy, especially in the area of child welfare. There is a long history of collective agriculture and small industry in the region (cheese, wine, ham, and plastics), and coincidentally but not surprisingly, the residents have elected a form of social-communism in the region for decades. American constitutional democracy and Italian socialism are essentially incompatible.

**Attitudes Toward Egalitarianism**

Interestingly enough, along with individualism, Americans also embrace an attitude of egalitarianism. In our educational settings, on the one hand, we value independence, self-directed learning, and the promotion of positive self-images; on the other hand, our prevailing social attitudes and teaching targets are often defined by decisions based on what is best for the group, the middle, the average.

This, of course, is challenged by our emphasis on individual differences, our identification of the gifted and talented, and our special recognition of individual learning styles. European notions are more clear-cut, with a view that values collective wisdom, group deci-