doing Reggio?

by Margie Carter

Last week, in two separate settings, someone told me their program was now 'doing Reggio.' To be honest, I wasn't sure how to respond. All right, I know most early childhood conferences now feature a number of sessions focused on Reggio practices. Yes, I've been inspired by the work of these Italian educators and the popularity of their ideas makes sense to me. They speak to some of our deepest longings for children and our work as educators. But I'm equally aware of our American propensity to get caught up in fads, to appropriate ideas, to go for a quick fix. So when someone tells me they are 'doing Reggio,' I worry and wonder. What could they be doing? What could they be thinking? I picture our Italian colleagues straining to be patient and generous, conferring about how to handle the disdain or disappointment they feel. How many times have they said that we mustn't try to copy them, that we must invent our own way into a relationship with the complex ideas that have guided the evolution of the schools of Reggio Emilia?

"We make the road by walking," reminded one of our American education pioneers, Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee. Though Horton's work focused on adult education and social change, I often imagine him walking in step with the early childhood educators of Reggio Emilia, Italy. They share an understanding of the transformative power of education based on dialogue and critical inquiry. In his later years, Horton worked with Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who, in turn, had some contact with Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio, so we know an exploration of these profound democratic and empowering educational principles has criss-crossed the globe. My hope is that any U.S. educator or school interested in Reggio will undertake a serious exploration of the ideas underpinning this approach, along with reflecting on your particular place and American context. Otherwise you will be doing Reggio and yourself a great disservice.

In a book of conversations between Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990), Horton is reported to have said, "The way to do something is to start doing it and learn from it." Freire added, "The question for me is how is it possible for us, in the process of making the road, to be clear and to clarify our OWN making of the road." This exchange helps me get at my worries as well as the questions I want to put before my U.S. colleagues who claim to be 'doing Reggio.' In my opinion, the American approach is often to jump into the doing without a plan for how to learn from what we try. And, we are inclined to copy, rather than work from clarity about our own identity. So, here are some possible questions to guide our walk on this learning journey:

- Why are you interested in the Reggio approach?
- What are you doing that you think is inspired by Reggio?
- How would you describe the core ideas underpinning Reggio practices? Are these similar or different from your earlier philosophical and pedagogical approach?
- What is unique about your context, history, or values that shapes your own identity as you draw inspiration from Reggio? How does this influence the way you want to transform or strengthen your practices?
- What is your process for learning from what you are doing and for continuing to deepen your understandings and practice with these ideas in your context?

Margie Carter lives in Seattle and travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood organizations. To learn more about the books and videos she has coauthored with Deb Curtis and the focus of their Harvest Resources work, visit www.ecetrainers.com.

Studying versus adopting

In writing about their encounters with Reggio, our American colleagues Carol Brunson Phillips and Sue Bredekamp (1998) offered these reflections:

"The schools of Reggio Emilia are part of a system that is based on a shared set of beliefs about children, families, and learning, and reflects a well-conceptualized organization. . . . In short, a stable and explicit fundamental structure surrounds teachers and provides the security of a vibrant core mission for their daily work. Teachers are freed to add to and enhance the structure, but they do not have to invent its fundamentals. . . . Too many teachers in the U.S. work in programs that do not have a well conceptualized philosophy and organization; they are expected to make do without one or make it up as they go along."

Re-reading this contrast helped me clarify why programs in the U.S. have trouble walking a coherent road. With the current educational emphasis on 'adopting' a research-based curriculum, most U.S. programs purchase a curriculum package and then arrange for their staff to be trained on its use. This is certainly convenient, but I often see directors bypass philosophical explorations and confuse the notion of professional development with compliance. They neglect to guide teachers in a deeper examination of the ideas and values they want to guide teachers' planning and interactions. Without this ongoing study together, 'making their OWN road' is reduced to following individual preferences and techniques, as Phillips and Bredekamp suggest, rather than collaborative reflection on how theory and philosophy relate to practice.

If you want to 'do Reggio,' this is the rigorous work you must undertake:

- You can't purchase or adopt a Reggio curriculum.
- You make a road from a town in Italy to your own place and context by clarifying your beliefs about children, families, and the teaching and learning process, and relating Reggio principles to your own context.
- Steadily, with hard work and many barriers to overcome, you align your educational philosophy and theoretical foundations with an organizational structure, systems, and policies to support and reflect the values and practices you hold dear.
- You can draw inspiration from the growing body of literature by U.S. educators working to interpret Reggio ideas for their own settings. A few examples are listed at the end of this article (Cadwell, 1997, 2002; Hendrick, 1997, 2004; Scheinfeld et al., 2008). However, you make your own road with a deeper understanding of your own context.

Strategy:
Form study groups

If you are interested in Reggio, launch a study group to explore the key ideas underpinning this approach to early education. Do whatever is necessary to make this happen. You can start with articles from journals, but before long, dive into a fuller exploration by reading and discussing *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards et al., 1998) together. Move on to other books and articles, but keep coming back to this seminal work, chapter by chapter. Save your professional development dollars and go on study tours to Reggio-inspired programs in the U.S. or Canada (visit www.reggioalliance.org for a listing). Do this with careful preparation and an equally thoughtful plan for returning home to reflect together on what you have learned.

Unless administrators and teachers engage in this study together you will find it hard to get beyond window dressing and a superficial grasp of the transformative practices implied by the Reggio principles. Administrators may find it valuable to study additional resources such as *The Visionary Director* (Carter & Curtis, 1998) and *The Dance of Change* (Senge, 1999).

Strategy:
Be serious, yet playful

As you engage in serious study and reflection on Reggio ideas and your own setting, try expressing the understandings you are consolidating in some concrete ways. Work together to create an ongoing list of the values and concepts you want to be guiding your program. I often suggest doing this with a three-column chart, focusing the first on what you believe children deserve, the second on what families deserve, and the third on what the staff deserves. As you do this, keep probing with "Why?" and phrasing that gets more specific than clichés. Doing this work over a period of time can eventually become the bones of a written vision statement for your program or a description of why you do what you do.

I recommend you also periodically do this work in the playful vernacular of our early childhood culture. For instance, create a new ABC book, delineating what you see as the deeper components of quality care and education. Try redefining the 3Rs, by describing what you see as the rights of children, families, and teachers. Remember that if it is to be sustainable, hard work must be laced with play and a joyful spirit. Anything worth doing is worth having fun with.

Strategy:
Learn to cross walk with requirements

If you are mandated to adopt a research-based curriculum, your study of Reggio ideas enhances your ability to specifically translate how this educational approach meets the intent of such requirements. Reggio practices are based on substantial theoretical foundations articulated in *The Hundred Languages of Children*. This text

provides reference to other influences on the development of their ideas and practices. At the center of their thinking is the idea of 'the teacher as researcher' and Reggio educators have made reflections on their experiences with children highly visible. Harvard's Project Zero (2001) has had a research project focused on Reggio, and more recently, a research team of the Erikson Institute (Scheinfeld et al., 2008) studied the Reggio-inspired Chicago Commons Child Development and Head Start program. You can learn to describe how the Reggio approach is research-based.

Don't get hung up on small issues such as how you label your shelves or learning centers, or whether you have a specified number of books or toys in an area. Your task is to be very thoughtful about what you are doing and effectively articulate how this meets the intent of particular requirements. I've seen Reggio-inspired teachers use a number of creative approaches to interpret how their work meets other requirements. For instance, inserting learning outcomes benchmark codes into their documentation stories, or drafting a curriculum statement citing their theoretical foundations, research, and resources (see Curtis & Carter, 2007 for examples).

Would you say you are 'doing Reggio'? In the end, if you are drawing inspiration from these remarkable schools, what's most important is that you heed Freire's question and clarify your OWN making of the road, not just claim a brand name for yourself.

References

Cadwell, L. (1997). *Bringing Reggio home. An innovative approach to early childhood education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Cadwell, L. (2002). *Bringing learning to life. A Reggio Approach to early childhood education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Carter, M., & Curtis, D. (1998). *The visionary director*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2007). *Learning together with young children: A Curriculum framework for reflective teachers*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1998). *The hundred languages of children: Advanced reflections*. Greenwich: Ablex Publishing Company.

Henrick, J. (Ed.). (1997). *First steps toward teaching the Reggio way*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Jenrick, J. (Ed.). (2004). *Next steps toward teaching the Reggio way: Accepting the challenge to change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Horton, M., Freire, P., Bell, B., Gaventa, J., & Peters, J. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Phillips, C., & Bredekamp, S. (1998). Reconsidering early childhood education in the United States: Reflections from our encounters with Reggio Emilia. In Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. *The hundred languages of children: Advanced reflections*. Greenwich: Ablex Publishing Company.

Project Zero and Reggio Children. (2003). *Making learning visible*. Cambridge: Project Zero and Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children.

Scheinfeld, D., Haigh, K., & Scheinfeld, S. (2008). *We are all explorers. Learning and teaching with Reggio principles in urban settings*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Senge, Peter. (1999). *The dance of change: The challenges to sustaining momentum in learning organizations*. New York: Doubleday.