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Ideas for Training Staff

Calling All Inventors

by Margie Carter

INVENT — *to come upon, find, discover; to devise by thinking; to produce for the first time through the use of the imagination or of ingenious thinking and experiment.*

— Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

This past spring I had the opportunity to join a study tour to the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy. Ever since, I've been adjusting my vision and understanding about the early childhood field in the United States. I see we've become obsessed with rules and regulations when what we really need is to become visionary inventors.

First, a confession. Though I had studied most of the literature and my work has been influenced by ideas from Reggio, I went to Italy with some reservations and skepticism. The tendency of U.S. folks to idealize and pursue fads has always bothered me, not to mention the way we appropriate anything we fancy for our own purposes. I know these cultural persuasions are deep inside me and I try to monitor my urges in that direction. Years ago, I smiled when I first read Sue Bredekamp's reflections on Reggio in *Young Children* and Bonnie Neugebauer's here in *Exchange*. I have high respect for these women and don't think of them as groupies or in pursuit of the latest fad. I wondered — should I ever go to Reggio — if I, too, would find myself replacing reservations with glowing reports. Read on and see what you think.

Much has been written about the attention to beauty in the Reggio schools. We've seen pictures of their light-and-nature-filled spaces, along with documentation displays of their in-depth projects featuring the development of children's theories, relationships, and awesome works of art. Those who study the Reggio approach remind us of how valued children are in Italian culture; how skilled teachers at these schools have become at observing, documenting, and collaborating; how included the parents are in the learning community; how intensely engaged and welcoming of conflict everyone seems. It was exhilarating to be with all these things in action.

We all know the dangers of trying to copy the Italian schools and saying we're "doing Reggio." Our Italian colleagues remind us again and again that we must invent our own ways. The few programs that I've seen succeeding in this invention process never claim they are using the Reggio approach. Rather, they are careful to describe the process of their experiments and dialogue to discover what these ideas mean for their own learning, as well as that of the children in a particular North American context.

I've been ruminating on which of the inspiring ideas from Reggio have the greatest potential to lift us beyond our overwhelming acceptance of mediocre child care in this country. Which ideas might inspire and carry us across that thin wire of maintaining quality into the creation of something more delicious and nutritious? Rather than just getting by, could we apply ourselves to crafting a program culture where people are excited about learning and invested in a bigger, more satisfying vision for children and themselves? How can we develop ourselves as inventors of a different kind of child care in the United States?

STRATEGY
Cultivate new images — of the child, the teacher, the family.

Though "the image of the child" was a concept familiar to me before visiting Reggio Emilia, I was particularly taken with the contrast between the Italian image of the child as capable and the U.S. image of the child as needy. In fact, the primary focus of our advocacy work is focused on children's needs, their vulnerability

and powerlessness. It is obvious that our culture pays only lip service to children, and they are subject to far more neglect and violence than needed resources. But what happens for these children (and for ourselves) when we who care for and teach them primarily view each child as needy rather than capable? How does that impact their identity development, our time together each day, and the overall development of our cultural values?

We have to ask ourselves this same question when it comes to our image of the teacher and the family. Yes, each teacher and family has particular needs, but what about the particular capabilities and curiosities adults bring to our programs? What if we began to shift our language and thoughts towards a different image of the child, teacher, and family?

For instance, what if our staff meetings regularly raised questions about things individual children and staff members are curious about and appear eager to learn, rather than always talking in terms of their problems? What if parent applications, intake forms, or home visits were focused more on their hopes and dreams for their children than on the routine sharing of information? What if we asked them to identify something they are proud of and willing to teach others in the center and that was the focus of *parent involvement hours* instead of the usual requests to help with the mending, fundraising, field trips, or special events?

An image of a child or adult isn't useful to us as an abstract idea. It has to be uncovered and communicated through a process of envisioning, observing, dialogue, and self-examination. If our staff meetings had this type of focus, rather than a series of announcements and scheduling details, wouldn't we be inventing a different climate in our programs?

In the schools of Reggio, there is no question about the image of the child, teacher, or family. You discover this in each interaction and piece of written literature. Visual images of the children previously and presently enrolled — their lives, thoughts, dialogues, and activities — are documented in large displays everywhere in the building. And you see teachers with a self-image so obviously different from most in programs here.

Bonnie Neugebauer captured a lovely description of these composite images:

The child is learning about himself or herself, about others, about the world. The adults are engaged in learning about the children. This is their vocation, perhaps their avocation.

Adults sit at tables, hover over light tables, move as the needs of the children dictate. They are watching and listening, recording; they are engaged in learning about the learning of the children. And the children see all this. The fact that they are being observed as they work, that the adults are so interested in what they are doing, that what they are doing is of such great significance that it is being recorded, all send a powerful message to these children.

As inventors trying to transform mediocre child care, try devoting time to assessing the images in the heads and on the walls of your program. Consider how these images, in turn, impact the heads and hearts of the children who spend each day there. If you were to change some of your images, what do you think might happen to the adults, as well as to the children?

STRATEGY
Give attention to beauty.

Outside of the early childhood field there are any number of studies detailing how an environment impacts attitudes, behaviors, and one's ability to think. Lighting, colors, sounds, smells, and the arrangement of space are all important considerations. The schools of Reggio take this very seriously and refer to the environment as another teacher. In the United States, the early childhood profession has focused on sanitation, safety, size scale, organization, and order. It's unusual to find much attention given to lighting, the natural world, and the arrangement of materials to provoke curiosity and discovery. More likely than not, the space feels institutional rather than artistically designed, more like a catalog than a place where real people create their lives together.

Attention to beauty is not a luxury but a necessity — for learning minds, bodies, and spirits. Engaging beauty is central to preventing boredom, lethargy, and despair. When adults and children spend the bulk of their waking hours within the walls of a sterile, cluttered, or faceless institution — with time scheduled into little boxes — what kind of people will they become?

There is no doubt a wide range of aesthetic preference among the staff in our programs. Can you take more time to discover and cultivate what people see as beautiful? What could you include in your job application and interview process to indicate that diverse expressions of beauty are invited and expected in your program? What elements do you include in your staff room, office, entry and hallways to model the arrangement of space for curiosity and discovery? As an inventor, what do you need in your planning process and budget to incorporate more beauty into your environments?

STRATEGY
Create the role of pedagogista for your staff.

Reggio educators are finding that some of their ideas don't easily translate into English and the term

"pedagogista" conveys this dilemma. We have education coordinators, staff trainers, and, in recent years, mentor teachers, but none of these roles quite compares to that of a pedagogista, someone who helps the teachers think about the learning process for both the children and themselves. Teachers are expected to see themselves as researchers and collaborators, and the pedagogista helps them identify their questions, pursue hypotheses, observations, and forms of documentation that will facilitate learning for the adults, while communicating and preserving a record of what is unfolding. How different this is from our roles of coordinator, director, or even teacher educator in college or workshop settings.

With an acute staffing crisis, our in-service training focus is to quickly give teachers information and techniques for working with children. We have written guidelines, checklists, and performance standards we try to monitor, but who is coaching the teachers into learning their art and acquiring their skills? How do caregivers in your program get mentored into the inquiring and improvising process they need in order to do their jobs well? Who helps them learn to think effectively about children and themselves, to work through conflicts with their coworkers and the children's parents?

We would have a major leap in the quality of our programs if we doubled the salaries of those who want a career in early childhood and supported them with a pedagogista. Does this sound like pie in the sky? Are you full of yes, buts? Consider the alternative: the literal cost of continual turnover (see the new publication from the Center for the Child Care Workforce on how to compute the actual dollars you spend in hiring, orienting, and training new staff) and the current cost in terms of stress, mental health, and demoralization.

If you currently have an administrative staff of more than two, why not revamp your job descriptions to create a role more similar to that of a pedagogista? If you are a small program with limited funding, consider sharing this position with several other centers. It is critical that we find a way to create this role of pedagogista which is unlike any administrative position we have yet invented.

STRATEGY
Lay down your "yes, buts" and cultivate hope.

My study tour to Reggio included any number of remarkable people; but by far the most striking were Karen Haigh and 15 of her staff members from the subsidized child care and Head Start programs of Chicago Commons. With all the problems of poverty invading their program, if anybody could be expected to say, "Yes, but there's no way," it would be them. But Karen wouldn't let that happen:

From the beginning of my directing work here, I knew my challenge was to go beyond just meeting the standards, which is what most people reach for as a goal for an inner-city program. I had a driving belief that children, families, and staff members all have the potential to continually learn and grow. With this in mind, I began to think in terms of instilling a sense of hope as a primary goal. My search for a way to do this led me to the schools of Reggio in Italy. Most inner-city child care and Head Start programs don't get access to progressive, visionary ideas. The focus is usually just about needs, deficits, and survival.

My exposure to these Reggio schools began as an exploration and led to an inspiration. At first, I was hesitant to do anything. Reggio Emilia and the inner-city of Chicago are so completely different. I knew we would have to invent our own way, and I questioned whether we could.

With myself and my staff, I had to learn how to focus on opportunities and not obsess over the barriers and obstacles or allow ourselves to get stuck and stay there. I didn't want to settle for small results. We are going for something more than what seems possible at any given moment and steadily developing an organizational structure to give staff the time, resources, and development activities they need.

Before we left Italy, I gathered our group together for some reflections. I asked them, "What have you discovered while here on this Reggio tour? What hopes and goals do you now have for yourself and our program?" As I usually do, I took notes to type up and return to the staff. We often come back to these notes to give us a sense of direction. At this final meeting in Reggio Emilia, there was a tremendous outpouring, perhaps best summed up by one teacher who said, "I've come to believe in myself. I really see possibilities. I'm hopeful now."

Visiting Italy hasn't left me eager to find Reggio clones around the United States. Quite the contrary, I'm hungry for news of more people like Karen Haigh and her staff — inventors who are finding inspiration and a fierce determination to build a new vision for their program. If you're out there, let me know who you are. I'm starting an inventors' fan club.

Margie Carter lives in Seattle, Washington, and travels widely to speak and consult with programs. She has co-produced two videos of programs inspired by Reggio, Children at the Center: Reflective Teachers at Work and Setting Sail: An Emergent Curriculum Project. Her new book with Deb Curtis is entitled The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing and Improvising in Your Center.