

RE-CAP OF REGGIO WORKSHOP
at The New School West, East Wing
October 26, 2010 -- 6:30pm-8:45pm

New and returning parents, plus one grandmother and a friend, joined Roleen and Kris around a bounteous table of wine and beer and cheese and cookies and veggie sticks, for a mighty introduction to Reggio and the ways in which it manifests in our fine school. "Mighty" meaning substantial, passionate, sincere, open-hearted, and totally inspiring.

COMMUNITY being a critical touchstone, the meeting began with introductions. Roleen emphasized her feeling that the New School West does not operate as a hierarchy. The parents, kids, teachers, staff -- as a community we are powerful as a group of learners. Every incoming group of parents and kids prompts a "start over," a reassessment of "Do we really get Reggio?" An evening like this affords an opportunity to deepen their own learning through "telling".

The broad goals of the evening:

- provide a bit of the history of Reggio
- describe the primary values of Reggio
- talk about who WE are with regard to Reggio
- give some scenarios to illustrate the above

Roleen and Kris have both traveled to Italy in the course of their research. [The documentation committee would like to come along next time.] Roleen spoke reverently of Carlina Rinaldi, former Director of the municipal early childhood centers in Reggio Emilia, and set the tone for us, oriented us, with some of Rinaldi's wisdom:

[some condensing and paraphrasing here, needless to say, the pen moves only so fast]
-- "do nothing without meaning... to live is to find meaning in life" Don't just follow, really work to find meaning in what you do.

- "my wellbeing is your wellbeing and your wellbeing is my wellbeing"
- "togetherness is a part of my identity"
- "each of us is a builder of theories"
- "we are born with a WHY"
- "everyday the children are looking for meaning... they are attempting to produce theories"
- "support an attitude of questioning"
- "the role of adults is to learn from the child"
- "the exact answer may not be most useful"
- "a SCHOOL OF LISTENING... listening is looking at life, an act of love, a sharing of emotions, a reciprocal act, the silence of wonder, an openness to differences...you make my words important to me because you listen to me"
- "it is our responsibility to observe and reflect"

Roleen went on from there:

- REGGIO IS NOT A METHOD, IT IS A WAY OF THINKING
- ... it was such a relief to realize that we don't have to know all the answers [because the answers, in some sense, come to us through our listening]
- the CULTURE of Reggio, and NSW, is to listen, and reflect questions with questions
- curriculum is not pre-planned... it's not about teaching certain predetermined things

-- children are not our future, they are very much our present... so what are THEY telling US, and what can we do to improve their learning?

She is often asked "What's your curriculum?", which is hard to answer. One response might be: "The children are learning how to be a person making relationships, with materials, with people, with space."

-- an example of making a relationship with space: a child in circle says "I can't see!" -- the teacher must try and find out what they mean when they say this... is there too much noise? is somebody touching them?... then they can say "find a place where you can see"

-- and more about the physical space of NSW: In the culture of Los Angeles our fondest memories may often be associated with the freedom that comes from being outdoors. So what about our school? The outside space is so small! Where can the children RUN? Yes, says Roleen, we are who we are, but the children are outside ALL DAY, and they're always moving, they're not cooped up, they don't need to break loose

some common myths about Reggio:

- children run the place
- children run the curriculum
- no plastic toys "allowed"
- that there can be such a question as "What part of Reggio do you do?"

... so let's start with a little historical context

Reggio Emilia is a town in Northern Italy, destroyed by the war, and given a stipend to rebuild. Local mothers wished to put this money toward making a new preschool, a place to have beautiful things. Loris Malaguzzi, an educator in the district, became aware of the project, and said "I'm a teacher, I want to be a part of it." He came to be known as the "founder" of the Reggio Emilia approach. The school was to be a place in which the community could ADVOCATE FOR THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN. Almost fifty years later, in 1991, Newsweek published an article about the 10 Best Schools In the World... and Reggio schools were on the list. This prompted a closer look at the culture of these schools...

REGGIO VALUES #1: THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

This is where it starts, by adjusting how we perceive a child. Reggio says the child is STRONG! competent, capable... they give US ideas, and these ideas are valuable, let's write them down!

By contrast, our own culture tells us that children come from a "deficit" place, children need to be protected because they are not strong enough, we need to build walls, impose our wisdom

Roleen was stunned by the PLACE of children in the town of Reggio Emilia -- their art is on the subways, 4-5 year olds designed the opera curtain

The Reggio approach incorporates threads of many theories... for example the idea from Montessori that children have the right to furniture that fits them, the right to beautiful things... also Howard Gardner's "multiple intelligences"

So we give children real tools, like metal shovels, and we collaborate with them about rules to keep them safe, like wearing shoes, and not having too many shovels. Metal shovels are tools for meaningful digging, meaningful work... plastic shovels don't facilitate meaningful work, so ironically THEY are the ones that become weapons, etc.

At every turn, the children are told "I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT!" Plastic shovels say: you're not capable. Plastic dishes do, too, by the way. (note: we're talking about preschool age kids, not little little kids) Of course, introduction of ceramic dishes, for example, must be done conscientiously, with respect for the children. Circle time is good for this, the teacher can talk about the new material, present it with ceremony, maybe on a tray under a cover ("this is important! this is beautiful! this is meaningful! and you can do it! it's for you!"). Then the kids who don't already know how to be careful with ceramic are PUT IN CHARGE, and shouldering this immense responsibility, they become the EXPERTS... they CAN really do it. Shifting the image of the child....

Children want friends, they want relationships, they don't want to work in isolation, and within a Reggio way of thinking, they DO make relationships, because they are expected to, they are capable

... Alejandra, Carla's mom, made the point that at home we often have very low expectations of our kids....

From Vygotsky, Soviet psychologist and the founder of cultural-historical psychology, another piece of the pie: "We learn from people who have had an experience before us." This is more about life experience than age -- younger kids with siblings often are teachers of older kids

SELF-ESTEEM IS ABOUT CONFIDENCE

Regarding CONFLICT RESOLUTION... teachers are constantly facilitating, finding out what is really going on in any particular situation... "I'm curious about what happened when you pushed him." They don't do "time outs", because it doesn't solve anything. If a child is having a meltdown it becomes "your body is telling you that you need to control yourself, how can you do that?"

RESPECT IS HUGE

Expressive language is secondary to receptive information -- it takes a long time to learn how to truly express what they know. Recognizing this is part of respecting children. For example if a child hits... it's a major leap to calmly use words. Highly commendable intermediate steps usually include using words WHILE hitting... then no hitting but YELLING the words... then finally finding a tone that the other person can hear.

Respect can't be taught explicitly, it is all about MODELING.

Part of the old model was tight scheduling, 40 minutes for activity A, 25 minutes for activity B.... which doesn't fully value what the child is doing. Within Reggio, the child is given a peaceful place, where they're allowed to complete what they're doing. Also, MISTAKES are great, because they indicate that a child is "working on a theory."

REGGIO VALUES #2: THE TEACHER IS NO LONGER A TEACHER OUT OF CONTEXT... they are researchers with the goal of gathering information to guide the learning.... the teachers are also, in a sense, students... they are learners, too.

Roleen gave the example of the recent long-term project initiated by the self-generated "Cup Group", a group of kids who became concerned that the paper cups weren't being recycled. The teachers didn't TEACH about recycling... but they guided the learning, encouraged the presentation of theories about how to communicate with the other kids about recycling, to make informational signs that really worked. Some of these signs were formally presented to our larger LA community... Kris shared a few... the pictures are brilliant, but here's a taste of the verbiage:

"Do not use plastic bags, turtles think they are jellyfish"

"If you litter, it doesn't keep the environment well"

"The environment is the future. If you hurt the environment the whole world will die, even the sea creatures and the giraffes"

DOCUMENTATION... serves many purposes, one being a key component of the teacher's own research. The signs on the walls reflect back key aspects of the learning, they are not just for display. Anyone should be able to walk alone into the space and know who works there and what they do.

Documentation also places the learning in a group context... it illustrates (and reinforces) who a child is in a group.

The handout with the faces of all West Wing children says: Who are we as a group? Who am I in this group?

Documentation is also for parents....

REGGIO VALUES #3: HOW DO WE INVOLVE PARENTS? (AND WHY?)

A Reggio way of thinking seeks to engage parents in the larger learning process -- it's not about cheap labor (though Roleen is quick to say we are appreciated, and necessary). It is SHARING THE WORK, meaning a sharing of the research process, a sharing of the learning, involving the parents in what the teachers are learning -- as opposed to the older model of parents "staying out of the way."

REGGIO VALUES #4: ENVIRONMENT AS THIRD TEACHER

The environment itself is instructive. Ideally a child could enter an environment and know exactly what to do there, even without a teacher.

Lights, shadows, platforms, and mirrors provide DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES.

The windows at NSW were chosen with a lot of thought -- a child in the East Wing can look all the way across the courtyard and into the West Wing and see what work is happening there. Everyone is connected, the work is transparent.

Over the years the school has been fixed up not to be pretty -- although it surely is -- but with the goal that every aspect SUPPORTS LEARNING. Certainly there is more to do, for example finding an alternative to fluorescent light.

HOW CAN WE BRING REGGIO INTO OUR HOME?, someone asks... so often it's about transitions -- going to bed, going to school, getting dressed -- we can't just let our kids have two hours to "explore" going to bed...

Roleen says: Well, at school we have very firm guidelines, actually. Circle time has a duration, snack has a duration, there are routines, and routines offer safety. And they are also given A TIME TO EXPLORE, as part of their routine. This can be done at home, too.

... at home you can have

-- clear guidelines

-- firm boundaries -- certain things are non-negotiable

-- but involve them in the making of these rules, tell them the situation, get their ideas, write them down, read them back, discuss them, VALUE THEIR IDEAS. The child can be part of problem solving

-- yes, value their ideas... it's very easy (and common) to say "we can't do this right now, we have to go to bed, we'll do it later"... then later never comes. [documentarian's note: the day after this talk, my son brought in his lego box just as we were walking out the door, I told him we had to go, he said no he wanted to play with legos -- it was important to him, more than just a momentary distraction -- so in bold marker on an index card I wrote "we will play with legos right after the nap" I was going to post it somewhere, but he was really excited and wanted to fold it up and put it in his pocket. Over the next two hours he periodically took it out and checked it. After the nap it was his first thought, and we played with legos. It was 100% great for him, and for me. Hmmmmmmm.....]

-- another demonstration of valuing them is one-on-one time, even if it's 15 minutes. And not conflict resolution one-on-one time... they need attention even where it's not about INTERVENTION...

-- this kind of thing communicates "We are a family working together... I'm not ok if you're not ok"

-- also: don't have more things around than can be organized, put away. Our culture tells us that more is better... but do we really need all these toys?

Someone asks Roleen's opinion about involving technology in the home...

She suggests that it might be asked of a given technology

-- if it is used as a tool to express an idea

-- if it involves working with a group, as opposed to in isolation

-- watching a computer for hours does not indicate a "long attention span"

-- a computer-based drawing program, for example, can be a TOOL for learning...

... there is a meaningful difference between LEARNING TO DRAW, and DRAWING TO LEARN

and this segwayed into another core element to the Reggio way of thinking:

“THE 100 LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN”

-- speaking is a language... drawing can be a language... clay.... wire... trombone...
and well, 95 others (not really, but you get the point)
-- it's important and deliberate that at NSW, after they have been introduced, paint, clay,
wire, etc. are available all the time. All are tools for expression.

IN CONCLUSION:

New School West is a school inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. That said, it has
it's own unique culture, reflecting Roleen and Kris and this particular group of teachers,
students, parents, and neighbors. Other “Reggio schools” have their own idiosyncratic
culture.

Roleen invites further questions, challenges to any of the ideas, thoughts about what
does or does not resonate... How do we respond to all this? We are a part of this
process!

“The Hundred Languages of Children”, by Loris Malaguzzi, translated by Lella Gandini

The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.
A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.
The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy

to love and to marvel
only at Easter and at Christmas.
They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.