

A Hundred Hundred Hundred More....BC Children Have 100 Languages, Too

For the last two decades, educators from around the world have been flocking to the small town of Reggio Emilia, in Northern Italy, to witness first hand the work which takes place in the municipal early childhood settings. The Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education, which takes its name from the city, has been widely recognized, with its innovative programmes acknowledged by educators, psychologists, and researchers from all over the world as the most exceptional example of the highest quality early education that the world has ever seen (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Gardner, 2000; Newsweek, 1991). Many early childhood programmes internationally now consider themselves influenced by Reggio Emilia. An exhibition of the children's work from Reggio Emilia, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, has toured the world, to wide acclaim. (This exhibition will be in Calgary, Alberta, from January to May, 2006).

Visitors to Reggio Emilia, myself included, are initially struck with the sophisticated and beautiful art projects undertaken by the youngest citizens in this community. Repeatedly, Reggio educators are asked, "How is it possible for such young children to create such stunning and detailed art?" Much of what we see exhibited in work coming from Reggio Emilia depicts the children's drawings, murals, 3-dimensional structures, and other forms of artistic products. Steeped in a culture of fine art, children in Italy are surrounded by beauty. However, in

Reggio schools the idea is that it's not merely about "art." Rather, media that might be considered "art media" are used to advance thinking and to represent challenges for representation. In one well known example from a preschool in Reggio, children returning from summer vacation were intrigued by the notion of "crowds." Over time, the children represented ideas about crowds by drawing, photographing, and ultimately creating a three-dimensional crowd of people in clay.



Figure 1: *The Crowd*. Created in clay by the children of XXV Aprile School, Reggio Emilia.

One of the central tenets of the Reggio Emilia Approach that has guided and continues to drive the Italian educators' work is the idea that every child is a creative child, full of potential, with the desire and right to make meaning out of life within a context of rich relationships, in many ways, and using many "languages." Children are communicators, developing intellectually through the use of symbolic representations, including words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, and music, all of which lead children to surprising levels of communication, symbolic

skills, and creativity (Edwards & Springate, 1993). These multiple forms of representation have come to be known as the “hundred languages of children,” after founder Loris Malaguzzi’s poem (1993) - “the child has a hundred languages, and a hundred hundred hundred more.” Reggio educators believe that children have the right to use many materials in order to discover and communicate what they know, comprehend, wonder about, question, feel and imagine. They make their thinking visible through many natural “languages” (Cadwell, 1997). It was from this fundamental premise that the *atelier* was conceived and developed, and still evolves (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005).

Being artistic and creative is highly valued in this school culture. Large space is allocated to art studio/workshops, called *ateliers*, in each school. The *atelier* is considered a vital part of every Reggio Emilia school. The *atelier* contains a wide range of media and materials for fostering creativity and learning through projects, and provides a place for children to learn and use a variety of techniques. It is equipped with easels, paints, markers, small objects for collage, items from the environment (shells, leaves, nuts, twigs, etc.), a light table, clay, wire, transparent containers for viewing and a multitude of other materials. Each school also employs an *atelierista*, a teacher specifically trained in the arts, who collaborates with the classroom teachers in planning and documenting children’s work. The *atelierista* “makes possible a deepening in the instruction via the use of many diverse media” (Edwards et al., 1993, p. 10). In addition, each classroom has a small art studio connected to it, a *mini-atelier* where art materials are plentiful and accessible to children. All of the materials are laid out aesthetically on open shelves and in clear containers, creating hues of colours to behold. Teachers support children’s efforts to plan creative activities and choose accompanying materials. Allowing time for children to use a wide range of media ensures that students are actively engaged and genuinely interested in their work.

The *atelier*, which is used by all the children and adults in the school, is described by Malaguzzi (founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach) in this way:

The *atelier* was included in each school as part of our wider educational project for young children and it became part of each infant-toddler center starting in 1970. The work in the *atelier* is seen as integrated and combined with the entire didactic approach. The intent was to react to the marginal place assigned generally to visual and expressive education. We also wanted to react to an education based on words and meaningless rituals and give possibilities to a child seen as rich in resources, and interests to a child interactive and constructivist. We wanted to create possibilities to refine taste and aesthetic sensibility, to observe and find theories about children starting from scribbles and going forward. We also wanted to try out tools, materials, and techniques. We wanted to support creative and logical paths the children would choose to explore. The *atelier*, in our approach, is an additional space within the school where to explore with our hands and our minds, where to refine our sight through the practice of the visual arts, where to work on projects connected with the activities planned in

the classroom, where to explore and combine new and well-known tools, techniques, and materials (Gandini, 1998, p. 172).

Elsewhere, Rabitti (1992) quoted Malaguzzi in response to a question asked of him regarding how many children who attend the Reggio Emilia schools become artists:

There's often this misunderstanding about our schools...The atelier was a way to undermine the tradition, of introducing complexity into a monolithic structure. In the 'school of words' we introduced the 'school of doing,' activities which meant the introduction and strengthening of many expressive languages, such as painting, sculpture, graphics, which are traditionally considered subordinate to basic skills. It's not true. They are complimentary. The child learns and understands through art as well; basic academics and creativity can reciprocally strengthen each other. We entrust art with the same task we entrust logic and mathematics. Art expressions are not ancillary to writing and reading...Art – that is creativity, imagination – is not a myth out there, it is inside the child, every child; it is in his/her very way of learning...That's why the atelier didn't remain a secluded place where to 'make art,' but burst into the school, melted into the school (p. 21).

Consistent with Howard Gardner's (1993) notion of schooling for multiple intelligences, the Reggio Emilia Approach calls for the integration of graphic arts as tools for cognitive, linguistic, and social development. Presentation of concepts and hypotheses in multiple forms of representation – print, art, clay sculpture, painting, drawing, wire sculpture, construction, drama, music, puppetry, and shadow play – are viewed as essential to children's understanding of experience. The arts allow perception, awareness, judgment, and the expression of ideas to occur in ways that are not purely linguistic or mathematical, as in reading, writing, science and technology study. These alternative ways of knowing may be most visible in young children, who are not always able to clearly express themselves verbally (Wright, 1997).

The importance of the *atelier* must be connected to the idea of the hundred languages. In a society like that of today, which tends toward the standardization of communication, the hundred languages should be considered as an antidote to conformity. As Reggio educator Lella Gandini says, "We think of the hundred languages as the endowment of the individual, as a metaphor for the construction of knowledge, as democratic participation that goes beyond the single voice by giving a positive force to diversity and to the different languages" (Gandini, 2005, p. 71).

In the program notes associated with *The Hundred Languages of Children Exhibition*, Malaguzzi highlighted a number of issues pertaining to the recognition that humans have the privilege of expressing themselves through a plurality of languages (apart from the spoken); specifically, every language has the right to realize itself fully, and in the process, enrich other languages. Reggio educators hold the belief that expressive, cognitive and communicative languages must exist in equal dignity and value.

Non-verbal languages have within them many concepts, sensations, thoughts, and modes of existence that serve as organizers of practical and formal logic. They generate complex images and vocabularies, metaphors and symbols, movements and acting, and personal and creative styles. Einstein commented that his preferred method of working was to remain within the realm of images, postponing for as long as possible the expression of ideas through words or actions (Wright, 1997). Nearly four decades ago, Jerome Bruner (1966) referred to similar modes of thinking and understanding, stating that human beings use three ways to translate experiences into a model of the world: action, imaging, and symbolic representation. It is this third area that can be readily facilitated through the arts.



Figure 2: Kindergarten artist, inspired by Wassily Kandinsky's *Concentric Circles*

The arts, as we see in supported in Reggio Emilia, provide a powerful means to promote learning, particularly for young children, because they involve nonverbal, symbolic ways of knowing, thinking, and communicating. Through open-ended curriculum planning, children, teachers, and families can take active roles in guiding the processes of discovery, pursuit, self-awareness, personal communication, social interaction,

perception, skill use, analysis, and critique. These forms of learning, which are vital to the processes of expression and making

meaning, should be central to the education experience. By making the arts the core of the curriculum, societies can begin to reaffirm their cultural role of giving our lives a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose (Wright, 1997).

Art educator and educational philosopher, Elliot Eisner (1997), makes a powerful claim for what the arts can teach us:

One of the first things that work as the arts develop is a sense of relationship, that nothing stands alone....every aspect of the work affects every other aspect....the arts teach the ability to engage the imagination /as a source of content....they are among the most powerful ways we become human, and that is reason enough to earn them a place in our school.

Surely, this is being realized in the schools of Reggio Emilia, and can inspire us in Canada to consider what value we place on the arts in our own programmes.

The ideas of Charles Fowler, an American educator who passionately advocates for the arts, would resonate with the educators in Reggio Emilia:

Today's schools are concerned, as they rightly should be, with teaching literacy. But literacy should not – must not – be limited to the written word. It should also

encompass the symbol systems of the arts. If our concept of literacy is defined too narrowly as referring to just the symbol systems of language, mathematics, and science, children will not be equipped with the breadth of symbolic tools they need to fully represent, express, and communicate the full spectrum of human life... Educational administrators and school boards need to be reminded that schools have a fundamental obligation to provide the fuel that will ignite the mind, spark the aspirations, and illuminate the total being. The arts can often serve as that fuel. They are the ways we apply our imagination, thought, and feeling through a range of “languages” to illuminate life in all its mystery, misery, delight, pity, and wonder. They are fundamental enablers that can help us engage more significantly with our inner selves and the world around us. As we first engage one capacity, we enable others, too, to emerge (Fowler, n.d.).

The Hundred Languages

No way. The hundred is there.

*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.*

*~Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini)
Founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach*

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