

What Happened After: Professional Development as a Catalyst for Program Change

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Abstract

Exposure to the Reggio Emilia approach has led to greater awareness among early childhood educators of the importance of the arts, project work, and documentation. To be successful in integrating visual arts, teachers need to acquire the knowledge and skills for working with the arts and experience a wide range of art materials, methods, and processes guided by those expert in arts education. This paper discusses some of the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach and then describes professional development opportunities available at an early education center whose curriculum was influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach. These opportunities include the Hundred Languages of Children exhibition, the “Making Connections to Reggio Emilia and Beyond” educational institute, and observation of a model early childhood program. The paper then describes a three-day professional development institute intended to help teachers develop more background in the arts and projects through interactive sessions with artists.

Exposure to the Reggio Emilia approach has led to greater awareness among early childhood educators of the importance of the arts, project work, and documentation (Katz & Chard, 2000; Taunton & Colbert, 2000). While recognizing the benefits of developing children’s social, intellectual, and creative competencies, many early childhood educators are unsure as to how to initiate and sustain a project or what makes a good project (Katz & Chard, 2000). To be successful in integrating visual arts, teachers need to acquire the knowledge and skills for working with the arts and experience a wide range of art materials, methods, and processes—guided by those expert in arts education (Taunton & Colbert, 2000). However, educators often receive little, if any, training in project work, documentation, and art methods and materials for project development, or in integrated curriculum that can help them begin a change process in their programs.

Professional development in the integration of visual arts and project work is well suited for the active learning approach familiar to early childhood educators (Piscitelli, 2000). According to Piscitelli, active learning projects for adults should include sufficient time to discover ideas, solve problems, and create projects, as well as adequate resources. Projects should also encourage both active engagement and reflective thought, and they should challenge participants to think beyond the current knowledge base.

Hundred Languages of Children Exhibition

A sublime example of the power of children’s project work to foster educational change on an international level is the Hundred Languages of Children exhibition (HLC exhibition). The HLC exhibition was organized in the early 1980s by the schools in Reggio Emilia to promote the study of their educational methods as well as to reveal the enormous potential of young children for learning and creativity.

The HLC exhibition includes children’s project work and documentation around themes or investigations such as “Shadowiness,” “Color in Our Hands,” “Harvesting Grapes with the Farmers,” and “Rain in the City.” In projects that may last from a week to several months, children—

individually, in pairs, or in small groups—are shown actively engaged in exploring a topic or problem and seeking to represent their understandings in different media. Children draw, work in clay, construct in wire, paint a mural, or perform a shadow or puppet play as part of their investigations. The HLC exhibition has traveled all over the world, deeply affecting those who have encountered the work of these schools in promoting children’s learning and creativity.

In Fall 1998, the HLC exhibition was on display in the Joyce M. Huggins Early Education Center (Huggins Center), California State University, Fresno. More than 4,000 visitors saw the HLC exhibition. In conjunction with the exhibition, a professional development program was offered: “Making Connections to Reggio Emilia and Beyond: An Educational Institute.” Dr. Lilian Katz was one of the featured instructors for the institute and taught the weekend course “Engaging Children’s Minds: The Project Approach.”

In addition, those attending the exhibition and institute were able to observe a model early childhood education program in the Joyce M. Huggins Center that serves mainly low-income student parents by providing services to 180 infant-toddler, preschool, and school-age children. The center has a state-of-the-art facility and an exemplary curriculum influenced by study of the Reggio Emilia approach. A key to the success of the center is the presence of an artist as part of the teaching team. The center provides an ideal setting for observation, training, demonstration, and research for university students, other students, and educators interested in learning about the best methods for early childhood education. The center has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards for its innovative program. Viewing the classrooms in the Huggins Center illustrated in a concrete way how ideas from Reggio Emilia can transform early childhood education practices in an American setting, providing a starting point for newcomers to this approach.

Expressive Arts and Documentation

According to educators in Reggio Emilia, the arts—painting, drawing, music, dance, drama, clay, paper, puppetry, etc.—are like “a hundred languages,”

affording multiple paths for symbolic thinking, learning, and communicating ideas (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Through creative expression, the enormous potential for development present in every child can be fully realized. Malaguzzi (1998) believes that “creativity should not be considered a separate mental faculty but a characteristic of our way of thinking, knowing, and making choices” (p. 75).

Recognizing the invaluable contribution of the arts to education, schools in Reggio Emilia include an “atelier,” or studio classroom, and an “atelierista,” or artist, on staff. In Reggio Emilia, the artist assists the children and teachers in becoming well versed in the arts and media and in creating documentation (Vecchi, 1998).

Documentation is a visual account of learning, often involving student project work, that is installed in the classroom or school. It consists of a formal, systematic, selective presentation that may include observational notes, photographs, audiotapes, video, and the actual products of children’s work (Rinaldi, 1998). Documentation serves as an individual and collective “memory” of activities, a method for reflecting on learning that leads to new experiences, a way of sharing learning with others (Vecchi, 1998). Because documentation is public, it can be accessed equally and discussed by all, including those who are in the school daily—teachers, parents, children—as well as others on whom the school depends for support—community members, business leaders, and politicians. Documentation is recognized as a unique contribution by Reggio Emilia to early childhood education (Katz & Chard, 1996).

Hundred Languages for Learning

“A Hundred Languages for Learning: The Expressive Arts in Early Childhood Education” was a follow-up to the HLC exhibition and institute that examined the role of the arts in education. This three-day professional development institute sponsored by the Huggins Center was designed for educators in varied settings, including preschools, kindergartens, and primary grade and elementary classrooms. Each participant at the institute received a packet of materials containing the institute program guide, session handouts, list of Web sites on the arts and on

Reggio Emilia, and the bibliography “Selected Resources about the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education.” The institute “revisited” the principles and practices from the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, in order to extend this multisymbolic learning approach into the schools and classrooms of participants. The institute was intended to help teachers develop more background in the arts and projects through interactive sessions with artists.¹

During the institute, participants worked directly with more than 25 artists to learn techniques with clay, paint, photography, dance, music, drama, puppetry, papermaking, collage, and other media. Integration of the arts into the curriculum, use of materials and media to represent understandings within the context of a long-term project, and use of documentation strategies were emphasized.



Institute sessions in the arts encourage participants to explore identity and transformation.

At the beginning of the institute, participants were asked to brainstorm a topic that could be researched during the institute and offer a focus for their creative explorations in different art forms. Participants were then divided into small groups of between 8 to 15 persons to discuss possibilities. The topic suggestions from the small groups were then brought before the large group for more discussion and debate. As a result of this process, “growth and change” emerged as a topic that could be researched individually, within the small groups, and by the total institute. The phases of a project as described by Katz and

Chard—planning, investigation, and conclusion—were presented in relation to the design of the institute.



Participants learn drawing and painting techniques while creating large-scale murals on growth and change that progress to completion over the three days of the institute.

The small groups continued to meet throughout the institute to reflect on their experiences in the various sessions, to think about growth and change in relation to these experiences, to discuss their questions, to plan investigations, and to relate new learning to their classroom curriculum. A place for displaying creative work and wall space for sharing reflections and comments were made available. The small groups also worked on a collaborative performance representing what they had learned about growth and change and on a concluding event for the institute. These ongoing small group sessions brought wholeness, continuity, and a sense of purpose to the institute that is often lacking in a conference format.

Following the initial discussion, a collaborative music-making event facilitated by the musical group “Cerro Negro” was held. The entire group of institute participants experimented with percussive rhythms using household objects (water bottles, cans, sticks, etc.) to create a musical prologue for the institute.

At the midpoint of the institute, another large, outdoor event, which was open to the public, was held that included simultaneous outdoor performances by various artists.

In the final afternoon of the institute, the small groups each gave a presentation/interpretation of growth and change, lasting 5 to 10 minutes, that combined all that



Simultaneous, interactive performances by the artists held outdoors on a large grassy area invite participants to experience the arts from a different perspective.

was learned in the various art forms of dance, music, drama, and visual arts. The conclusion to the institute that evolved over the course of the program was a lively procession of participants marching across the university campus announcing their newly developed talents.



As the institute enters the final phase, the small groups work on and then stage performances combining movement, music, poetry, stories, and imaginative creations to capture the process of growth and change and its implications for work with children.

Conclusion

The institute encouraged teachers to develop a greater command of the “Hundred Languages.” As educators in Reggio Emilia are eager to point out, when we begin to view the child as a powerful learner, we must also alter our conception of teachers and other adults:

When we in Reggio say children have 100 languages, we mean more than the 100 languages of children, we mean the 100 languages of adults, of teachers. The teacher must have the capacity for many different roles. The teacher has to be the author of a play.... Teachers also need to be the main actors in the play, the protagonists.... Teachers need to be set designers who create the environment in which activities take place. At the same time, the teacher needs to be the audience who applauds. (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 60)

Institute participants came to realize the value of nurturing their own creative capacities—for professional as well as personal growth. One hopes the institute participants will continue to seek out training and partnerships with artists in an effort to further their own creative development and foster children’s deeper learning.



The institute concludes with a magnificent, colorful processional of all the participants announcing their newly developed talents as they walk across the campus.

Note

¹An 8-minute video, “The Expressive Arts in Early Childhood Education: A Professional Development Institute,” is available from the author.

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