

Authentic Childhood:

A Book Review

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Over the past three decades, the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching early childhood learners has become more widely known in Canada. In the new Saskatchewan Kindergarten Curriculum which was published in 2010, the influence of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is evident. In her book, *Authentic childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom*, Canadian educator and author, Susan Fraser outlines the basic principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, the foundations of the approach, and also shares stories of teachers that use this approach to engage young children in learning. The book is practical in nature; encouraging teachers to take the information presented and apply it to their own classrooms to improve early childhood education programs. This book is of interest to early childhood educators interested in learning more about using and implementing the Reggio Emilia philosophy in their classrooms.

In Chapter one, Fraser describes her experiences as part of two study tours to Reggio Emilia, Italy in 1993 and 2002. Fraser has also included the history of how the Reggio Emilia approach to early learning emerged from the social and economic conditions following World War II. This chapter also describes the major theoretical influences that helped to form this approach and includes the guiding principles of the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Chapter two deals with the image of the child in Reggio Emilia. Fraser describes the image of the child according to different theorists, including Dewey, Erickson, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Biber. Importance is placed on the need for teachers to understand their own image of the child. This chapter also includes information on the principles of inclusion and multiculturalism

in the Reggio Emilia approach. The Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes inclusive classrooms. What Canadian educators call students with special needs, Reggio Emilia educators call students with special rights. Students with special rights are given first priority to entrance into these programs (Malaguzzi, 1998). This chapter concludes with a case study from a school in China that is currently using the Reggio Emilia approach. The case study shows the international appeal of Reggio Emilia.

Chapter three outlines the role of the teacher. Fraser discusses the changes in the role of the teacher since Froebel first presented the idea of Kindergarten. Fraser explains the structure of the Reggio Emilia schools, including the roles of the Pedagogista, Atelierista and the teacher. Reggio Emilia schools emphasize collaboration between the different adults working with the children. A comparison of Reggio Emilia teachers and North American teachers is given, showing the subtle differences in values, attitude and knowledge construction style as the teacher moves from the traditional image of teacher, to that of teacher, researcher, facilitator and co-creator of knowledge. Fraser also includes information about teacher education programs and how the Reggio Emilia principles can be incorporated and taught to future teachers.

In Chapters four and five, the importance of relationships in the Reggio Emilia approach is discussed. Fraser first talks about the importance of creating relationships and partnerships with families. She then discusses the reciprocal relationship that exists between the teacher and the child. She talks about the importance of communication with children and how the communication must be geared at guiding student learning. This can be done when the teacher creates a flexible curriculum, links play and relationships and presents appropriate materials. Fraser also introduces the idea of the environment as the third teacher. In Reggio Emilia programs, the first and second teachers are the classroom teacher and the parents; the

environment is referred to as the third teacher (Malaguzzi, 1998). The relationship between the environment and learning is a very important principle of the Reggio Emilia classroom. The environment of the classroom needs to reflect the values of the teacher. Teachers need to identify the values that they hold in regards to young children so that the environment can be planned accordingly. When planning the environment, the teacher needs to address aesthetics, active learning, collaboration, transparency, bringing the outdoors in, flexibility and relationship.

In Chapters six and seven, the curriculum of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is explained. Fraser begins by discussing the importance, purpose and use of documentation in early learning classrooms. She outlines the different forms that documentation can take, including photographs, videos, sound recordings, art work, etc. The cycle of inquiry is discussed in its relationship to documentation. Different ways to create documentation are described, including documentation panels and portfolios. The ways in which documentation can be used by teacher as a form of assessment is described. Fraser describes challenges that teachers face when incorporating documentation into their early learning program and how these challenges can be overcome. Fraser then explains how documentation leads to the negotiated curriculum. She begins with a history of teacher directed curriculum. Fraser describes the terms emergent curriculum and negotiated curriculum and differentiates between the terms. Negotiated curriculum sees children as the co-constructors of knowledge along with the teacher whereas emergent curriculum implies that the curriculum is only emerging from the interest of the children, without the negotiating with the teacher. The negotiated curriculum is what is commonly used in the Reggio Emilia approach. The phases of negotiated curriculum are described as the design phase, documentation phase and the discourse phase.

Chapter eight discusses a key component of the Reggio Emilia approach, aesthetics. Aesthetics comes into play both in the environment of Reggio classrooms, and in the work that the children create. Children are given high quality materials to use. Children are encouraged to represent their ideas in many different ways, using many different mediums. In this philosophy, before children begin creating their representations, they must be taught the proper ways to use art tools. Children are taught to both create and respond to art.

Chapter nine, entitled “The Investigating Classroom”, describes how to create a classroom where investigation is encouraged and nurtured by the teacher. Fraser explains that classrooms need to be equipped with proper materials and students need to be given the freedom to use these materials in different ways in order to support an investigating classroom. Fraser discusses the theoretical background behind the investigative classroom, including ideas from theorists Piaget, Vygotsky and Gardner. Fraser illustrates the importance of such a classroom by including several examples and descriptions of classes using this method. Fraser concludes the chapter with a list of factors that help to promote investigation in the classroom. These factors include ideas for teachers, materials and the environment.

The final chapter of the book discusses the 100 languages of children. This was a term coined by Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach. The 100 language of children represent the many different ways that students are able to communicate their ideas through drawing, sculpture, conversations, building, etc (Malaguzzi, 1998). In this chapter, Fraser discusses the language of art, the language of numbers and the language of relationship. In the language of art, the need to provide children with the necessary language to discuss art topics is emphasized. Children need to have the necessary tools to communicate. In the language of numbers, examples are given of classrooms that have immersed the students in

numbers and other mathematical concepts to encourage students to explore these topics. In the language of relationships, Fraser emphasizes the importance of relationships in learning and the connectedness of all things.

Fraser includes many practical examples of how the Reggio Emilia approach is used in Canadian daycares and schools. Fraser weaves these stories into her book, throughout the chapters, illustrating how different components of the philosophy can be used by early childhood educators. It is important to note that Reggio Emilia is a place, and the experiences there cannot be replicated. The examples included in the book show teachers how to take the ideas from Reggio Emilia and make them work within the structure of the Canadian education system.

Fraser also includes examples in each chapter of how teacher education programs can be using the principles of Reggio Emilia. Fraser uses examples of students working on their practicums and applying this philosophy in terms of documentation, creating an image of the child, aesthetics, collaboration, and the negotiated curriculum. The inclusion of teacher education programs demonstrates the importance of knowledge of early learning theories for education students.

Authentic childhood is a useful tool for early childhood educators. It is applicable to both educators who are interested in learning more about the Reggio Emilia approach, and those familiar with the approach who are interested in starting to apply the principles in their work. Fraser's narrative is easy to read and includes numerous examples, photos and case studies. The examples in the book include both daycare and early learning environments, making the book valuable for all educators working with young children.

References

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