

Going Deeper: Exploring Reflective Practices with Inspiration from Reggio Emilia

by Sarah Adams-Kollitz

Rich artwork, beautiful classrooms, articulate educators: through conferences, art exhibits, lovely books, and fabulous study tours early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia have captured the attention of the early childhood community all over the world. The study of Reggio Emilia has engaged many educators in a dynamic dialogue about the potential of children and the direction of education, helping us think of ourselves not as child-minders, but as researchers, facilitators, curators, and active co-participants in a dynamic process. For many of us this has elevated the work we are doing to a new level of intellectual challenge and inspired us to see children, families, and ourselves through new lenses. Along with this inspiration has come an endless series of questions and the challenge to find a way to begin the explorations necessary to respond to those questions.

Initial introductions to Reggio Emilia, whether through independent reading,



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conferences, or — for the lucky few — a study visit, often trigger an impatience to get to work implementing new ideas and making improvements. However, this can lead to a critical misinterpretation of what is going on in Reggio Emilia. We end up admiring the product without understanding the process.

Educators in Reggio Emilia often describe their learning as a spiral or tangle rather than a linear process, which has been going on for more than 40 years. They are not talking just about learning experiences in the classroom; they are talking about the web of connections between many different people and ideas which cannot be understood in isolation.

“For us in Reggio, the infant-toddler centers are places of life for children, teachers, and families — places not only to transmit culture and support the family, but to create new culture, the culture of childhood, the culture of the child; places in which we can offer to our society a new image of the child, a new image of childhood, a new image of the teacher, a new image of the family” (Gandini & Edwards, 2001, p. 54).

If we see Lella Gandini's words as a challenge to create a new approach to education, we have a huge task ahead

of us. There is always a danger that in our efforts to tackle some of these questions we will oversimplify the complexity of these issues or rely too heavily on examples from Reggio Emilia, losing touch with the many tangles of relationships and inter-connected ideas we must work at deciphering in our own contexts.

A Personal Example

As a teacher and administrator, I have been very interested in the idea that inspiration from Reggio Emilia can, and should, lead to a process of self-examination. I understand anyone's reluctance to offer models that reduce the emphasis on process and try to deliver a product through emulation. Yet, I also understand that the best early childhood classrooms function well because of structures and routines that help support inquiry. With this in mind I began a multi-year study of structures and routines that might give teachers the opportunity for deep thought and ongoing inquiry about their work. The project was driven by the following questions:

- Where do we begin the process of understanding the many tangles of ideas and questions inspired by Reggio Emilia, which we must try to understand in relation to our own contexts?

- What processes and routines can support this ongoing work?
- How can we create settings where the exploration of challenging or unanswerable questions is valued and encouraged?

Reflecting on Reflection

Our inquiry began with, and focused on, the process of reflection for two central reasons. First, we were already familiar with the sort of reflection children do in the classroom and had experience with the many forms of highly personalized expression and interpretation children use to make sense of the world. Second, we sensed the process of reflection had the possibility to take us to new levels of understanding and exploration as adults, moving away from evaluating and judging each other's ideas and competencies to consider many perspectives and interpretations.

Taking cues from Reggio Emilia, it was important to step back from our intended starting point and examine *what we think we know* from a new perspective. Most of us were comfortable with the concept of reflection as the act of thinking about or looking back on experiences for the purpose of generating thoughts, ideas, opinions, and questions; but we had to reconsider the role we have given this kind of work. Traditionally, these acts have been the mark of thoughtful teachers, but are often seen as something done outside of school, or at least after the concrete work is done. If we wanted to create an emphasis on inquiry, the sharing of multiple perspectives, and the evolution of ideas, we had to give reflection an important place in the daily life of children, teachers, and parents.

We also took another look at our ideas about reflective practitioners. Was it only the people who shared their thoughts and opinions who were reflective? Again, following the example set in Reggio Emilia, we tried to open our eyes to the

value of each person and the potential we have access to through the creation of relationships and opportunities for connection. Instead of seeing some people as reflective and others as lacking the capacity for deep thought, we tried to proceed with the assumption that each person has a valuable perspective formed by their own unique, subjective ways of making sense of the world. We began to ask not whether the ability to reflect existed in each of us, but whether a context existed within which people were willing to share their perspectives.

Strategies for Reflective Practice

Here I would like to outline three strategies we used to give reflection a bigger role in our school. They are basic elements, not unusual in any way, except that when used over time they helped to support and strengthen our reflective practices. All of them were geared toward creating contexts within which people became comfortable sharing their unique perspectives, and within which we could return again and again to the difficult task of understanding ourselves.

The five-minute reflection. At our school this first strategy was practiced most often at the beginning of each weekly team meeting. Before discussing a predetermined topic, we devoted five minutes to silent writing in a reflection notebook. The reflection served several purposes:

- Emphasizing the importance of paid time for all teachers to reflect on the work they were doing.
- Affirming the value of all teachers' thoughts about their work and the potential for sharing those thoughts with others in a professional setting.
- Reinforcing the need to practice reflecting in order to build confidence.
- Giving everyone time to shift from leading children in the class to step-

ping back and making sense of their observations.

Because reflection was new to many teachers, we emphasized that we would practice regularly throughout the year. Everyone was expected to be respectful and participate in the silent reflection, but sharing was optional. Following the reflection, teachers were asked if they would like to talk about or read from their reflections. After teachers became comfortable with the five-minute reflection, we used it in many settings including whole staff meetings, in-service and trainings, and discussion groups with parents.

What we found was that almost everyone was eager to hear each other's reflections. The sharing of ideas and questions was often met with supportive feedback or the appreciative, "Oh, now I understand." Sometimes teachers became critical or impatient with peers who regularly refused to share or who were not attentive or respectful listeners. Time and practice helped some teachers become more participatory, as did clear guidelines for respectful listening. The questions posed before the reflection were always related to our work (and the general subject agreed upon ahead of time), but varied from highly theoretical to very concrete, drawing in different types of thinkers. We weren't able to achieve the perfect setting where everyone participated, but we were able to move from a setting where a few people dominated meetings to those where the majority of teachers shared on a regular basis.

The five-minute reflection was the first step in changing the language we used in discussing our work with each other. Phrases like "We know" were replaced with "We wonder." Questions such as "What do you think this means?" were not a signal of incompetence, but an invitation to share ideas. In our best discussions, half-formed ideas were considered, revised, and strengthened.

Eventually the five-minute reflection worked its way into classroom meetings with parents. Teachers planned hands-on experiences in the classroom for parents to experience without their children.

After the activities, parents were invited to reflect on what they wondered, understood, or felt. In many cases the comments from parents contained the following phrases: "I hadn't realized . . ."; "Now I understand . . ."; "I noticed I am . . ." Through their work with parents, teachers learned that the five-minute reflection was a tool, not only for eliciting different perspectives and deepening connections, but also for raising questions to be explored together.

Replacing traditional lesson planning with flexible planning. We replaced a variety of planning forms with a series of prompts created by surveying teachers on their interpretations of the word 'reflection.' The prompts included words such as *think, rethink, wonder, ask, look, look again, question*, as well as questions such as:

- What happened, how did it happen, and how might it evolve?
- How can we think about this from a different angle?
- What new ideas do I have now?

Teachers were asked to use one or more of these prompts to practice generating thoughts, questions, and impressions of their observations in the classroom instead of focusing exclusively on upcoming events and activities. The reflection did not mean we gave up on organizational planning, but that the generation of ideas, questions, and lines of inquiry came before decision making.

In order to reinforce the idea that reflection was a critical element coexisting and working in connection with observation and planning, we moved to a weekly reflection that included three elements:

1. **Observation:** What did you see?
2. **Reflection:** What does this make you think, wonder, or feel?
3. **Projection:** What ideas does this give you about how to proceed?

Further exploration of one area on which we focused may clarify this strategy. The idea of morning meetings was explored and altered in many classrooms through this process. Before reflective planning was used, the focus was on laying out a week's worth of activities and discussion topics for the meeting. Eventually teachers did not plan the next day's meeting until they had time to discuss and consider their observations from the previous day. The week's meetings were often guided by an overarching question and the meetings evolved into explorations of the questions from different angles in increasing depth.

In one case the teachers were puzzled and frustrated by children's whining and crying at morning meetings. They began by posing their question to the children: Why was this happening? After discussing this issue, they felt the children didn't have a clear idea of why this was happening. The following day they returned to the topic again and tried another angle, asking about how people use whining and crying to communicate. When they observed a lot of interest in talking about babies and babies' behavior, they began offering suggestions about how the topic might be explored (visits from real babies, visits from parents, collection of baby artifacts, and book research).

By watching, listening, and thoughtfully considering their next steps, the teachers learned that the children were most interested in discussing and documenting their own lives as babies and their growth since that stage of their lives. The whining diminished, but more importantly, the teachers were able to slowly uncover an underlying interest that represented potential and new knowledge

rather than a problem they had to fix.

Developing intentions. A final strategy we used was the development of classroom intentions. This is a strategy used very successfully at the College School in Webster Grove, Missouri, which we simplified and reworked for our own purposes. Rather than stating an intention for the year, each classroom developed

a series of questions they intended to explore through observation of and interaction with children and families. This process helped us bring emphasis to the process of generating big questions without finite answers which, in turn, generated lots of ideas and more questions. It also helped us become comfortable in sharing our reflective skills with parents and colleagues in a more public setting.

Our goal was to design questions that were open-ended and could not be answered by the teachers alone. The answers had to come through a process of exploration, observation, and provocation, and were specific to each classroom and teaching team. The subject of these guiding questions came from observations of the children at the beginning of the year (or previous years in looping classrooms) as well as teachers' interests and challenges. They covered a broad subject matter of interest to the children, as well as issues of how modifications to the environment might stimulate the children's interests. In one case, two classrooms of four year olds developed separate intentions around kindness and friendship. One class launched a study with the children exploring the meaning and uses of kindness, and the other launched an exploration with parents about their hopes and goals for their children.

We also worked on making these intentions more public. The teachers shared and revised these intentions in weekly meetings and eventually shared them

with the parents. The response from fellow teachers was almost always positive and many teachers expressed a deeper understanding of each other's work after reading the intentions. The creation of the intentions presented one set of challenges and the process of following them through the year offered a whole different set. Regardless of the resulting curriculum and documentation, the intentions made our questions and big ideas much more visible and provided a context within which uncertainty was accepted and encouraged.

Lessons Learned

During the year in which this project was conducted — and the two years following it — we continued to refine and reexamine these concepts. We learned that:

- Reflection is deeply connected to the concept of listening.
- Reflective practices flourish in contexts where they are received with an open mind and given serious consideration.
- Listening and reflection can be modeled, and some of the best modeling came in our preschool classrooms.

We began to give the same attention to our peers as we give to the children who we follow with clipboards and cameras, and to feel as comfortable asking each other the kind of questions we ask chil-

dren: Why do you think that? What have you noticed? What do you think is happening here?

Just as it has taken decades for many of us to become active, participatory listeners in the classroom, it may take many more years to feel comfortable in these new roles with peers. Yet, in this case we have each other and ourselves as models. Again, so many critical ideas that come from Reggio Emilia were reinforced:

- Learning is tangled and interconnected.
- Children's learning is not separate from adult learning.
- Examining the parallels between the opportunities we provide for the children and those we need as adults reminded us that the work we do with children has a great deal to teach us about how to engage fully and respectfully as adults.

Contexts change and the teachers involved in this project have raised new questions and explored other lines of inquiry. Yet, in the three years of this project, we have learned that we must always return to the big questions because they are never answered. So for the teacher who said, "I wish we could just get better at asking each other *why*," the project brought that goal to the front of the line and gave us the chance to make a bit of progress in that direction.



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