



North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

NEW JERSEY EDUCATORS EXPLORING THE PRACTICES OF REGGIO EMILIA (NJEEPRE): OUR STORY

By Alba DiBello

Alba DiBello is the owner and director of A Child's Place in Lincroft, New Jersey, a school for children aged three to seven, where educators have been exploring the Reggio Emilia philosophy since 1990. Alba is the NAREA membership coordinator for New Jersey and Chair of NJEEPRE. Polly Ashelman, of Kean University, is the Vice-Chair and the board members are Kathy Arleth; Marty Watson, Director, Union Congregational Weekday Nursery School and Sonja deGroot Kim, Kean University.

Creating a collaborative effort in New Jersey, a small state with a high population density and a good highway system, may appear to be a simple matter. You can drive the whole state in about four and a half hours, depending on the vagaries of the traffic situation. It would seem to be an easy place to make connections, but its size is deceiving and does not bear witness to the enormous diversity in the state geographically, culturally, economically and politically. Furthermore, there seemed to be no central point from which new ideas could begin and spread throughout the state. The proximity of the northern region to New York City and the southern part of the state to Philadelphia meant that people in those areas tended to migrate in the direction of those cities. Those of us in the rather bucolic and almost rural areas near the central shore area really didn't relate with anyone north of the Raritan River, the more urban and "congested north," or south of the Mullica River, in the "back-water country." There are

no major east-west highways in the state so the western part keeps largely to itself as well. Thus, the state is very regionalized with not much in the way of cross-region communication.

As colleagues then, the founders of NJEEPRE were not close neighbors, geographically, professionally or socially. We were four people, in four very different parts of the state, four very different contexts but the passion for quality programs for children, inspired by Reggio Emilia, was strong in each of us. One of our founding members, Kathy Arleth, was the one driven to bring people together in some way, so that networks could begin to form. She was a retired public school teacher of special education who had begun to integrate Reggio Emilia principles into her classroom practices after her visit there and who had done her graduate thesis on developing professional networks. With retirement came renewed energy to pursue this goal. She was based in southern New

Jersey, about two and half hours from the northern part of the state on a good traffic day. I first met Kathy at the inaugural NAREA meeting in New York City.

Marty Watson had begun holding educator meetings focused on the Reggio principles in the school she was directing, Union Congregational Weekday Nursery School, a private church-supported school in Upper Montclair, which is toward the northern part of the state. She had visited Reggio Emilia and was trying to share what this experience meant to her and her work at the school, in the hope of finding new ways to collaborate with other interested educators. Dr. Polly Ashelman, Professor of Education at Kean University, attended one of those meetings, as did I. Polly and I had met before and we reconnected there. Polly was including information about the Reggio Emilia schools in her classes and was also searching for some like-minded educators who had experience with these principles.

During this meeting, Kathy sensed a group forming, and began a dedicated and very persistent effort to bring us together to simply discuss "possibilities," now our favorite word. We all agreed to meet, not knowing quite where we were going but sensing the importance of being with kindred souls and sharing the fragments of a vision. It was a vision yet to be pieced together but whose individual parts were clearly formed, forged in the passion we shared for affording optimum opportunities for children.

In an interview with Lella Gandini in *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach - Advanced Reflections*, Loris Malaguzzi says, "To be a member of a group is a situation of great privilege..." (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998, p. 95). Malaguzzi was referring to children when he made this statement but it would take on new meaning for all of us in time, particularly for me.

Initially, I was probably the most reluctant collaborator of the group, having had the longest experience with trying to spread the word about Reggio Emilia. I first visited Reggio in 1990 with the first delegation from the northeastern United States and I was the only member from my state. In 1996, I participated in the New York Committee for "The Hundred Languages of Children" Exhibit. For a brief time, I felt exhilarated by all the interest in the marvelous schools in Reggio Emilia. I made presentations at state

meetings and local community colleges, and at a few public schools. But the interest eventually waned as people reverted to comfortable ways. Change is too hard for many and a focus of suspicion for some.

I was not connected to any university or large non-profit group. As a sole proprietor of a small school, not affiliated with any organization, I was a lone voice in the wilderness. I had the courage of my convictions but no support, so I abandoned the idea of collaboration.

Feeling largely unsuccessful, I retreated into the comfort zone of my own space where I knew I could be effective, training teachers and forming partnerships with parents in new and deeper ways, and continuing my own study of the schools that so inspired me after so many years of practice. A Child's Place School was always a laboratory of sorts, as I was responsible for the program and practices, and our staff was used to being engaged in discourse and study. We began this journey of deepening our understanding and interpretation of the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, which we continue to this day. We often wondered why we were so alone in this interest in our state but we felt very satisfied with our work and how things were developing. We eventually found that we were not alone, as Kathy's determination to bring us together and Marty's efforts at collaboration and education brought us to a new realization.

The four of us, Kathy, Polly, Marty and myself, met and shared our personal visions of what we thought could come from this group, which was small in size but big in expectations. Each of us had a piece of the vision we later incorporated into our mission statement. We talked about creating a network (Kathy's vision) for collaboration with others and for staff collaboration between schools (Marty's vision), and other entities such as universities and professional organizations, facilitating study and discourse among educators (Polly's vision), and providing pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, teachers of teachers and, possibly, school administrators, venues for local conversations (Alba's vision). We also wanted to study for ourselves, to go deeper in our own understanding. In April 2003, this conversation began, four passionate people meeting for coffee to talk about possibilities. We were inspired by the fact that those wonderful schools in Reggio Emilia probably began with a very small group of people, who had very passionate conversations about individual visions.

Ideas do not spawn from nothing. Good ideas germinate and find root elsewhere, if we prepare the soil. In this case, I had a friend who I respected and long-admired for her tenacity and vision. Susan Lyon, former co-chair of NAREA and founder of the Innovative Teacher Project in California, had begun a series of Roundtable Discussions, originally inspired by the book, *The Hundred Languages of Children*. I had long been intrigued with this project and proposed it as a possible model for our group, who by now had decided to name themselves New Jersey Educators Exploring the Practices of Reggio Emilia or NJEEPRE, a long name to be sure but the letters were easy to remember and we wanted a name that we could all agree defined us and what we were trying to do.

I met with Susan at the NAEYC conference in Chicago that year and, armed with a few pointers, I returned to the group and we began to shape the concept. The goal was to set up Saturday morning gatherings in various parts of the state during the school year, where teachers could discuss a reading and share their responses. The meetings were free of charge to encourage participation from all levels of the profession. We had no money but we did have the ability to get the initiative launched and some of us donated money for the postage to mail announcements of these meetings.

It is amazing that in four short years, we accomplished so many pieces of the mosaic of visions that we had in the beginning. Polly was able to enlist the cooperation of Dr. Deborah Allen, Chair of the Early Childhood Education and Family Studies Department at Kean University, to allow us to create a "Best Practices" exhibit in the classrooms where the students met. We arranged for sessions for pre-service teachers and graduate students to dialogue with us and review documentation of the work from our schools. We were joined by two new colleagues, Barbara Berger from Bergen Family Center in Englewood and Kim Cornell, a graduate student and teaching assistant. We also supported regional study groups, facilitated a collaborative book study for staff from three schools, presented at conferences, and organized a series of Roundtable Discussions held at four different sites throughout the state, which still continues as an annual series.

Our passion was strong enough to make all that happen easily but we had a harder time deciding on how to best organize ourselves formally. Some of us were

not willing to become committed to all that a formal organization demanded; others realistically knew that it was difficult to grow without a structure in place. Some did not want "to educate the world" and simply wanted to continue our own study. These were all legitimate views but they were pulling us in different directions. We discovered if we wanted to go beyond our own study, we had to try to obtain funding and be formally organized, and that was a difficult leap for some.

Much time was spent defining and redefining objectives and identity. We missed having conversations about practices and ideology, the current political scene and its impact on education of young children. We felt bogged down with business meetings. Kathy, who brought the original four of us together, was again the force behind driving home the point that since none of us had connections to funding sources, we would have to be recognized as a non-profit organization to get grant money. The four of us knew that we were still committed to our original mission of expanding our conversations to include many more voices and so we moved forward, though rather reluctantly, to becoming formally organized.

After four years, our group is once again composed of the original four, Kathy, Polly, Marty, Alba, and a new board member. Our colleagues no longer with the group are working in their own way with the Reggio principles, however, and a conference is being planned by Bergen Family Center in Englewood for February 2008 with Lella Gandini as guest speaker. Kim Cornell has begun a program called "Story Studio" for children and adults, and continues her study and interpretation of the principles of Reggio Emilia through her work.

NJEEPRE is now incorporated and applying for non-profit status. As such, we have begun to collaborate with Kean University on a more formal basis. Our proposal to begin a project to offer support and guidance to the Kean University Child Care and Development Center on the Union campus was recently accepted and a new relationship is being forged. The city of Union is almost in the center of the state!

The Child Care Committee of the Early Childhood Department of Kean University faculty, headed by Dr. Deborah Allen, recently held their meeting at A Child's Place School with the NJEEPRE board present.

We had a fruitful dialogue among all the participants, which also included a parent representative from the center, and all were very engaged by the documentation we shared of the work of the teachers, children and parents from this year, much of which was drawn from the inspirations of Reggio Emilia, interpreted through the lens of our regional context.

As chair of NJEPRE, Inc., I think I can speak for all of us when I say that, although we feel good about our formal organization status, we still long for more time to spend together just talking. There are always choices to make and for now, we must also look to the fact that the work we have done in connecting people has been very valuable. We have over four hundred names in our data base. Our fourth annual Roundtable Series for 2007-2008 will be held at seven different sites throughout the state, including two universities. We have a new relationship forming with NJAEYC and this fall, there will be a Reggio track at the NJAEYC conference. We have a new project with Kean University, which will hopefully provide many new possibilities. The state has become smaller or so it would seem!

The teachers in our two respective schools, A Child's Place and Union Congregational Weekday Nursery School, are very enthusiastic about future collaborations and are taking on possible projects on their own. The teachers have presented their work at

conferences and workshops, and have also formed study groups within their respective schools for all staff, including assistants. It seems as if collaboration is contagious, and brings deep satisfaction and ever-widening circles of ways to build knowledge together.

"In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher."
-John Dewey (*Democracy and Education*, pg.188)

The editors of *Innovations* and the NAREA Board would like to invite educators from Reggio network groups and collaboratives throughout North America to contribute articles about this form of professional development within their own communities, to be published in future NAREA Columns. Please send your approximately 1000-word articles to Judith Allen Kaminsky, j_a_kaminsky@wayne.edu

REFERENCES

Dewey, John. 1923. *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan Publishing.

Edwards, C, Gandini, L. and Forman, G., Eds. 1998. *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach-Advanced Reflections (Second Edition)*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

NAREA-RELATED INITIATIVES AT 2007 NAEYC ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Tuesday, November 6, 2007: "Different Contexts, Shared Possibilities": Study Tour of Chicago Commons Child Development Program, Chicago Public Schools Early Childhood Education Program & Governors State Family Development Center

Sponsored by CARIE (Chicago Area Reggio Inspired Educators) Network in Collaboration with NAREA (Discount for NAREA members)

Contact: Jane Cecil, 708-235-7336, j-cecil@govst.edu or Karen Haigh, karenmhaigh@aol.com

Wednesday, November 7, 2007: NAREA Pre-Conference Session, "What Can It Mean When Children, Parents and Teachers Collaborate and Research Together?"

(see NAREA Conference Program for time and location)

Thursday, November 8, 2007:

Membership Coordinators Meeting: 4-6 pm

NAREA Annual Meeting/Reception: 6-8 pm

(see NAREA website in September for name of this year's honoree and meeting location)

NAREA members will receive an e-communication in September with further details.