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North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

HOPE AND POSSIBILITIES: Inspirations and Insight from Hosting "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" Exhibit in Indianapolis, Indiana

by Ena Shelley

Ena Shelly is the Dean of Education at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. Butler University College of Education is part of the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative (IRC), which hosted "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit in Indianapolis, Indiana from July-December 2009. The other members of the IRC are the Early Learning Centers of Lawrence Township, St. Mary's Child Center and Warren Early Childhood Center.

In my remarks at the opening ceremony for "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit in Indianapolis, I shared the following quote from Carla Rinaldi from her text, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*:

"Reggio speaks to those of you who long for something else, another belonging. It gives comfort and hope by being different, by showing the possibility of different values, different relationships and different ways of living. For example, visitors to Reggio Emilia are usually coming home with a strong feeling that children, parents and politicians are really participators in the schools, that Reggio has involved them and created an interest and participatory engagement. To create such an interest, pedagogical documentation has been a fantastic mediator and tool. In Reggio, they have managed to make children's schools important in a democratic context, something which counteracts apathy and disinterest, which often is the result of not being listened to and taken seriously.

Reggio offers a sense of belonging to people longing for other values, relationships and ways of living.

At the same time, it erodes, even in a small way, the confidence of the dominant discourse, its critical thinking putting a stutter in that discourse's arrogant narrative of necessity and absolute truth. By doing so, it offers something very precious and in short supply today – HOPE."

Carla's eloquent and powerful thoughts unfolded in the six months of hosting and interacting with the exhibit. It began with educators in the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative spending two intensive days studying the exhibit, reflecting on the messages and insights that spoke to them, and then dialoguing as to how they could be curators to host visiting groups. This increased their sense of belonging in a professional learning community and presented the opportunity for new relationships to be formed to further their own search for meaning and understanding.

Two weeks later, another powerful learning experience with the exhibit occurred when Katie Wood Ray, Matt Glover, Susan MacKay and Brenda Fyfe offered seminars on the connections of early literacy to "the hundred languages of children." The insight each of these colleagues provided about understanding best literacy practices to support all children could not have been timelier in Indiana, where some policymakers advocate that the only way to teach literacy is through phonics and that reading is merely a skill of decoding sounds and symbols. This group gave depth to Carla's thoughts of disrupting the dominant discourse and addressing the arrogance of absolute truth!

Just slightly over a month later, Reggio educators Deanna Margini and Mirella Ruozi shared fascinating presentations on the principles and experiences of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, which offered strong connections and possibilities pertaining to our topic of social justice for young children and families. Deanna shared the changing demographics in Reggio Emilia and how they are learning how to form partnerships in learning with children whose first language is not Italian. For our conference participants, her remarks echoed the journey of inquiry in this country in regard to English Language Learners and presented the possibility for continued dialogue with our Reggio colleagues as we all evolve as global citizens.

The last major professional development experience with the exhibit occurred in December with closing remarks from Lilian Katz, followed by comments and reflections from three community leaders in policy, health and early childhood education. Lilian stated that the work and research presented by the educators of Reggio Emilia has inspired and informed people around the world, and those who had come to Indiana to experience the exhibit would likely leave with questions, possibilities and a renewed sense of hope for all children. She challenged us to think about the dominant discourse today that emphasizes measurable learning outcomes over valuing the processes of learning. She stressed that the exhibit offers a way of thinking about processes over outcomes and provides insight into children's interpretations of the world. Her message of hope and possibilities related directly to Carla's words.

The exhibit was housed in the Indiana State House and the hope of the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative was that it would offer possibilities for participatory engagement, and serve as a mediator and tool, as Carla described. Key legislators had been invited to all of the professional learning experiences and tours of the exhibit as well as to visits of centers and schools in the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative. The turning point in engaging policymakers occurred when the Chair of the Senate Education Committee accepted these offers. He was so intrigued that he requested all members of his committee to do the same. Originally, State Senator Randy Head had thought the exhibit was "cluttering up" the State House and at first glance at the exhibit, he described it as "fluff" and "children playing with napkins." To his credit, he took the time to listen, and opened his heart and mind to learning. As a result, he authored and sponsored a Senate Resolution to conduct a summer study of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, which passed with a vote of eight to one. In a letter I received, State Senator Head wrote:

"I look forward to working with you to introduce Reggio Emilia to my colleagues in the legislature. Together, we can expose them to the wonders that occur regularly in the lives of disadvantaged children. My hope is that this project will inspire legislators to focus more resources on early childhood development and spread the Reggio approach throughout the length and breadth of our state. This is not likely to be an easy journey, nor a short one. However, you and I agree that it is more than worth the struggle."

Another unexpected outcome from hosting the exhibit has been the engagement of PNC Bank with the early childhood community. PNC's community involvement priority is early childhood education and they are a new company in Indiana. The two people in charge of the community foundation toured the exhibit and have had extensive conversations with members of the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative. A new early childhood initiative has been launched with the support of PNC and a wide range of early childhood providers is now meeting regularly to form a coordinated voice of advocacy for young children. The exhibit created this opportunity for participatory engagement!

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Carla's [Rinaldi] words came to life during our six-month experience with the exhibit. We created a sense of belonging and built new relationships within the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative, and with new colleagues from within and outside of our state who encountered the exhibit. Our professional development experiences planned in conjunction with the exhibit challenged the current discourse, and focused on opportunities and possibilities. The exhibit was the tool to mediate change with state policymakers and early childhood educators/advocates and, thus, has brought the greatest gift possible for our children – HOPE.

—Ena Shelley

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REFERENCE

Rinaldi, C. 2006. In *Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*. New York: Routledge.

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Dialogues for Quality in Education: Our Image of Children, Our Image of Teachers, Our Image of Learning, Our Responsibility

In Collaboration with Reggio Children and Crossroads in Chicago (City of Chicago Department of Family Support Services, Chicago Commons, Columbia College Chicago and Chicago Children's Museum)

With "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" A New Exhibit from Reggio Emilia, Italy - North American Version

Columbia College Chicago, Chicago IL

June 23-25, 2010: *Tour of Schools & Conference (Option 1)*

June 24-25, 2010: *Conference (Option 2)*

Keynote speakers:

Carla Rinaldi, *Pedagogista*, President of Reggio Children

Graziano Delrio, Mayor of Reggio Emilia, Italy

Amelia Gambetti, Reggio Children/International Centre Loris Malaguzzi, Responsible for Project Promotion and Development, International Network Coordinator, International Liaison and Consultancy to Schools

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