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From Solos to Symphony: The Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative

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North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

From Solos to Symphony: The Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative

In this NAREA Column, the founding members of the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative share the development of their work together. 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

Symphony, as I call this aptitude, is the ability to put together the pieces. It is the capacity to synthesize rather than to analyze; to see relationships between seemingly unrelated fields; to detect broad patterns rather than to deliver specific answers; and to invent something new by combining elements nobody else thought to pair.

(Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind*, p. 130)

Butler University/Ena Shelley

Through my work as Professor of Education at Butler University, I have had the opportunity to work and learn with educators at St. Mary's Child Center, the Warren Early Childhood Center and the Early Learning Centers of Lawrence Township for many years. Eventually I realized that, while I was aware of how these programs were exploring the practices of Reggio Emilia, the programs' educators did not have a way of being connected to one another. Each of

the programs were involved in studying the Reggio concepts of environment as the third teacher, the role of relationships, and how to translate these ideas into their own learning communities. I knew that developing collaborative relationships among the educators in these programs would support our professional development and the evolution of study in the schools.

How fortunate for me to be able to assume the role of the conductor, who knew the sweet melodies each of these programs offered to children and families! I was able to connect the leadership of the programs and, together, we found ways to begin ongoing dialogue. This eventually led to many professional opportunities for faculty in all three programs, such as a Reggio-inspired course offered through Butler University, participation and presentations at state and national conferences, professional study group, and this summer, our very first Summer Institute in Indianapolis!

As you will read, the programs are all unique. Each one reminds me of a beautiful instrument, capable of playing a lovely solo. Together, we truly have become an Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative symphony and will enjoy creating our own music for years to come.

St. Mary's Child Center/Connie Sherman

Dr. Shelley brought the values of the Reggio approach to St. Mary's Child Center through her passion, wisdom and the sharing of beautiful images. The 208 children we serve live with great poverty and pervasive violence. These conditions are major barriers to their development but can be mitigated by involvement in high quality early childhood programs. Inspired by Dr. Shelley and with the intention to provide the best possible early childhood experience, we began to study and interpret the Reggio philosophies at St. Mary's.

Our journey in the study of the Reggio philosophy has been enhanced and strengthened by our partnership with the educators from Warren Early Childhood Center, the Early Learning Centers of Lawrence Township and Butler University through the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative. St. Mary's has experienced support, resource sharing and the generosity of the collaborative partners.

Partnership in the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative has truly been a "little miracle" for St. Mary's Child Center. We have participated in ongoing courses, visited Reggio-inspired schools, and received consultation from outside experts and our collaborative partners. Most importantly, the lives and futures of our children, who experience such challenges in life, are transformed as they learn in a Reggio-inspired program that reflects our goals as a community of learners.

Warren Early Childhood Center/Ron Smith

Five years ago, the Warren Early Childhood Center was a high quality, NAEYC-accredited program serving 150 children. It was a traditional American early childhood center operating kindergarten, special

education preschool, community preschool and childcare services under the auspices of the MSD of Warren Township. The program now serves approximately 450 children total, 150 with special rights, in a Reggio influenced setting.

We could not have predicted where we would be now when we began our journey just five years ago. Our study began with the support of Dr. Shelley, as she spent many days in our school providing staff development on project work and Reggio principles. She presented beautiful provocations to our staff, as she challenged us to reflect and think deeply about our personal values and beliefs regarding young children, and how those values and beliefs could be reflected in our learning environments.

Dr. Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) has written about the heart (values), head (theories) and hand (actions) of leadership. As young staff members have grown into leaders within our learning community, our study of Reggio principles has allowed us to begin with the heart and mind so that actions full of purpose and meaning can follow. Learning to collaborate with children, families and one another in new ways led us to desire a connection with others engaged in similar work. Our collaboration with our friends and colleagues from St. Mary's, Lawrence and Butler has provided us with opportunities to further refine our beliefs and values in ways we could not have imagined on our own!

Early Learning Centers of Lawrence Township/Denna Renbarger

For the educators in Lawrence Township, the influences of Reggio Emilia are reminders of courage. We find it takes considerable courage to act on our beliefs about young children. We are sometimes discouraged with the many things we are required to do; whether it be an imposed curriculum, a rushed day or an introduction to a skill that would be better left for next year. We often find ourselves living with compromises to keep our programs funded and requirements met. Yet we have found that through forming a community of like-minded educators, we have strength together in a common thought. Our agreement that our beliefs about children provide the foundation for our work and vault us to a measure of

joy is a radical notion, and it became the impetus for our collaborative.

All of the schools in the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative are different but are studying the same key components of the Reggio philosophy. Last year in Lawrence Township, we built four new early learning centers. We scrutinized our environment through the lens of our belief system. The influences of light, transparency, circularity and provocations that we see in photographs and read about from the schools in Reggio give us pause, but set a standard we strive to emulate. St. Mary's and Warren had recently undergone building programs and provided consult on the Lawrence building project, as did Dr. Shelley.

Making the capabilities of children visible through documentation is one of our greatest challenges. We marvel at the way in which our Italian educator friends make it look effortless although we know their work is the result of a great deal of thought, time and commitment. Educators in the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative have worked together on documentation - sharing their thoughts and analysis. Viewing the teacher as a researcher holds a key place in all of the schools in our collaborative. This perspective has become more understandable in our ongoing study of Reggio Emilia. We are especially benefiting from learning to have multiple perspectives and listen carefully to each other.

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The Third Annual NAREA Summer Conference

“Advocacy, Diversity and Alliance for the Rights of Children: Teachers, Children and Families as Co-Researchers”

June 28-30, 2007 (June 27: Tour of Santa Monica area schools)
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- Carlina Rinaldi, Executive Pedagogical Consultant, Reggio Emilia Municipal Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools
- North American educators sharing ongoing work in their schools

Panel Presentations:

- “Evolutions in California Early Childhood Contexts” with California educators
- “Evolutions in the Inclusion of Children with Special Rights” with Sharon Palsha, University of North Carolina, and Barbara Acton, Childhood League Center, Columbus OH

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