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I.T.P. Roundtable

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Participant: Reggio Study Tour March 2007

How did your experience of the opportunity for professional development visiting the schools in Reggio Emilia effect/change your daily work with children, teachers and families?

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One of the things that really stays with me from having experienced the study tour in Reggio is the unique culture, tradition and history that is reflected and so much a part of the daily lives of children and adults – the citizens of Reggio Emilia. I've thought about how my culture, tradition and history seem so separated from my daily life experiences. Maybe it's moving from place to place, or living in one neighborhood while working, playing and shopping in others. Or maybe it's the multicultural diversity that I love about the Bay Area, but makes it difficult to sense a culture, tradition and history of our own.

I think this idea started from the wonderful walking tour Sally and I took with a host from Reggio Children. As we strolled (in the rain) through the town of Reggio Emilia, she stopped every now and then to proudly tell us stories of her city and make connections to the context of early childhood and the Reggio Schools.

She shared the long-standing value of creative arts to the city. Here, the municipal theatre, which dates back to the 1850's. The neighboring Ariosto Theatre welcomed children of Diana school as they explored and experienced the theater. The children became a part of the theatre and it's history when they left the gift of an amazing main floor curtain made by the preschool children themselves. This speaks to the relationship between children and the arts community in this city.

Here, the main square, Piazza Prampolini. From the year 1414 when a town hall was first being built, to 1797 when Reggio was the first site of the Italian parliament and the tricolour flag was born. This Grand Piazza has been an important meeting place. Piazza Prampolini is also one of the spots where Loris Maliguzzi brought the children and their equipment out of the school and into the city centre to be seen, in action, by the people. This first hand experience of observing children, seeing what they are capable of doing, was a major step in transforming people's image of children.

I was touched by seeing this 'child and adult crossing' sign. Even this small notion that children are present and welcome to participate in this space, to me says a lot about their respect for children. It wasn't by a park or playground as it might be here where we live, it was in the town square by shops and businesses.

LaVilletta School project "Portrait of a Lion" was experienced here, outside the Basilica of St. Prospero. The six marble lion sculptures have been, over and over discovered ever since they were placed here in the sixteenth century. Children are able to make real connections with the city when given the opportunity to climb up and explore, to pretend and enjoy in this way.

We were asked how this experience has changed our daily work with children, teachers and families. I don't really see change in myself as much as I feel a new sense of purpose. A sense that the choices I make and the actions I take – or don't take - will have an overall effect on my daily work with children, teachers and families, but also it adds to the bigger picture of history for our school as the years go by. I recognize more now, that this history is important to give the school community a sense of unity, purpose, and hope. From visiting the schools in Reggio, I have seen how this also holds true to the city and greater community outside the school.

The study tour introduced me to the idea of 'making meaning'. Wanting to know more about this term, a concept they credit to Jerome Bruner, I have been reading and researching. I've discovered a whole new dialogue – a cross discipline dialogue which looks at modern and post modern perspectives which question many of the theories about research, practice and philosophical issues that shape our early childhood systems. Pedagogy like this, I'm used to in an academic or 'lab school' setting – How do I incorporate this dialogue into my daily work?

With all this, I think I've also learned to strive to "embrace complexity". Amelia Gambetti referred to this idea in her closing statement of the study tour. She stressed that life is a complex thing and there are many factors to be taken into consideration in the choices we make. I should not be overwhelmed by the complexity, nor should I expect a single right answer because there are usually more questions than there are answers, and the answers usually bring with them more questions, and this is OK. I am learning to be comfortable with complexity - even to seek out complexity in dialogue with others so our conversations can become richer.

Today, this gathering: these Innovative Teacher Roundtables have always been a great support to me in my professional development. It is a place that welcomes questions, dialogue and complexity. It is a place that nurtures thoughtful reflection and shapes visions for the future. Now, after visiting the schools, the International Center and the town of Reggio Emilia I think I have a closer connection to the ideas and experiences they share with us. It is truly inspiring!

## **AFTERTHOUGHTS**

Even as I sit here, about to read the prepared statement of thoughts, listening to Susan share the history of the Innovative Teacher Project, I am re-writing my statement in my mind. History – of course we have history. How could I be so . . . so . . . insensitive – as to imply we have no history. We do have history; the history of each school's journey into the realization that there needs to be a history – traces of where we've been and where we visualize we are going. . .and the journey along the way. We are living this history now. Who am I to judge and compare a thing like history?

San Francisco, as a city, has a very strong, important history all it's own – with the gold rush, immigration, shipping ports of entry, rebuilding after the 'great quake'. There are people for whom this history is very much a part of their daily lives. . . just not people connected with early childhood programs.

As for culture – How can I dare to say San Francisco has no culture? As I left the Saturday morning Roundtable that afternoon, I bumped smack-dab into the huge eclectic street party – house dance scene - the 'Love Parade'. If this isn't Culture – then I don't know what is. There's culture everywhere in San Francisco.

I suppose it's the part of 'how our history, tradition and culture becomes a part of our daily lives' that is unsettling for me. What was it for the citizens of Reggio Emilia to put such importance into children and childhood after the war that they took action in the manner that they did which resulted in the systems they have today? What was going on in our communities at that time that led us to the systems that we have today? I have some sense of this history from bits and pieces of information offered in a variety of different isolated contexts. (Industrial revolution – children seen as future workers; Christianity defining family roles and values; child care as a necessity for working/single parents, influence of developmental psychology, the 'women's movement' and civil rights, etc.) It would be interesting research to put together this information in more detail and show the connections of why we are the way we are in our history of childhood and early education. This is the stuff of historians, libraries, museums. . . why not teachers as researchers in the schools? The Malaguzzi center has become this for the educators in Italy. The exhibit "One City, Many Children" shows what is possible when the local history of childhood is presented in such a way. This will require a cross-discipline investigation as there are many fields of study that have different perspectives of what we know about early childhood. Yes, we have a history, I just haven't seen it presented in the way they have in Reggio. I have only my own education and experience to put it in context and to me this feels very isolated and disconnected.

As I reflect on these ideas dancing in my mind, I really do see that the culture, history and traditions of our lives is there – no question about that. We are a people rich with experience. The part that is missing is putting it in the context of a community of early childhood. A shared experience seen with the purpose of making connections to individual/family/ethnic/religious groups - the multi-cultural/diverse aspects of our community - to the new and unique ideas of childhood being re-defined for our generation.

It is a question of priorities and choices that we make as educators. Sure, we have learned to use the interests of the children to direct our curriculum and base our projects, but children are interested in many things. It is our responsibility as educators – together with parents – to be purposeful in our selection of projects with the children. I think it made an impact on me that so many of the school projects in Reggio were directly tied to a building, a place, a time or a story of their history, tradition and culture. The selection of the project came from a dialogue among the pedagogistas, teachers, parents and others to decide on a topic that was felt to be important to expose the children to – something that children may not have focused on, on their own, but when offered as a new possibility from parents and teachers, they take it and make it their own. For example, when the schools of Reggio were each asked to adopt ‘a building of great importance to the city’ and do a project to ‘highlight and bring attention to the site’ the “Dialogue with Places in the City” project was born. When children are exposed to concepts we, the adults in their lives, value and see as important and worthy, not only do we do ourselves the favor of preserving culture, tradition and history, but we are making these aspects of life, a living part of our daily routine and a foundational part of childhood memories for the children.

It is again the question of ‘how do we make this a part of our daily lives’. How do we ‘live’ culture, tradition and history in a way that it is something we know – something familiar and important and desired? Something we are proud to instill in our children and have them value as a part of their childhood. These can be first hand memories of their childhood, but also including tales of their parents and grandparents, actual buildings and parks and places to go, touch and enjoy. What part of their memories will become stories they will want to tell when people visit their homes, their schools and their city? Now and in the future.