

Book Review of *In Dialogue With Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching, and Learning* by Carlina Rinaldi

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Abstract

This article comprises a book review of *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching, and learning* by Carlina Rinaldi. The book is about the early childhood program of Reggio Emilia, Italy as interpreted by Carlina Rinaldi, the *pedagogista* and Director of the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia for 30 years. Rinaldi's most important articles, lectures, and interviews from 1984 to 2004 are collected in the 15 chapters of this text. This book review aims to highlight for readers a unique historical and cultural experience in relation to its particular philosophical and theoretical perspectives within a wider socio-cultural and political context. Moreover, this review locates theory and practice in Reggio Emilia schools as situated within its particular context.

Introduction

In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching, and learning is a critical book about the municipal early childhood schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The author, Carlina Rinaldi, is one of the leading interpreters of this form of pedagogy, and she served as the Director of the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy until her retirement in 1999. This is a book of theory and practice in the Reggio Emilia schools and its unique socio-cultural and political context. It is the fourth in a series edited by Dahlberg and Moss entitled *Contesting Early Childhood* aimed at questioning the current dominant discourses in early childhood and offering alternative narratives from multiple perspectives.

This book consists of 15 chapters that offer a selection of Rinaldi's most important articles, lectures, and interviews from her time as the senior consultant to the Reggio Children, an institute established by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia to manage the pedagogical and cultural exchange initiatives with teachers and researchers from all over the world. She was also a university professor and a city councilor for the municipality of Reggio Emilia from 1984 to 2004. Rinaldi offers a short introduction at the beginning of each chapter to give the context for each piece. The chapters are mainly organized chronologically; however, I will review this book according to various themes related to the unique cultural context; sociopolitical history; and philosophical and theoretical perspectives of Reggio Emilia schools. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss participation and communication, and then chapters 3; 4; 8; 11; and 12 explore the concepts of teacher as researcher and *pedagogical documentation* in relation to assessment. Chapters 6 and 10 are discussed together in considering their reflections on the value of spatial environment and creativity in the Reggio schools. Chapters 7 and 14 are explored together as two controversial speeches and finally, chapters 13 and 15 stand by themselves as representations of the concept of *dialogue* in the Reggio Emilia school culture.

Rinaldi starts her book with two speeches on the fundamental position of participation and communication as the two pillars of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. The opening chapter discusses the Reggio

educators' strong commitment to family participation at the organizational, functional, methodological, and political level as an intrinsic feature of their school culture. This chapter is particularly significant in outlining family participation not only as a choice, but as a fundamental right for children and parents.

In the next chapter, Rinaldi conceptualizes this communicative participation as a key objective in the Reggio schools. This chapter explores the contrast between the typically hierarchical structure of North American schools and democratically governed schools of the municipality of Reggio Emilia, where communication involves the whole institution without distinction. The extensive network of communication in the Reggio schools allows staff, children, families, and the management council to be involved in educational decision-making at various levels. This further determines the organization of spaces, scheduling, pedagogy, staff hours, professional development, and ongoing political; cultural; and economic debates.

In chapter 3, the author explores this culture of participation and communication and locates the teachers' role as one of great protagonism that emphasizes professional competence, intelligence, and abilities. This chapter challenges educators to deconstruct their understanding of teacher's professional identities from the vantage of abstract notions and to reconsider teacher identity as constructed in relation to teachers' relationships with colleagues, parents, and children. Furthermore, in chapter 4, Rinaldi questions standardized approaches to assessment as anonymous and decontextualised, and therefore, undemocratic. Instead, Rinaldi proposes the term *pedagogical documentation* as a tool for assessment and self-assessment. Pedagogical documentation includes recognition of schools and teachers as sources for research on learning while providing a generative force for the daily practice of teachers as researchers.

In chapters 8 and 12, the author elaborates on the concept of teachers as researchers in the Reggio Emilia schools. In particular, she emphasizes their role in actively interweaving doing- reflecting and theory- practice, which stands in opposition to traditions of outside educational researchers and the adherence to top-down curriculum mandates. In chapter 11, Rinaldi illustrates how research is a permanent attitude and a way of working used by both children and adults in the Reggio schools. The author argues that the terms *professional development*, *curriculum*, and *curriculum planning* are unsuitable to convey the complexity of the learning process happening in schools among young children. Instead, she offers the term *progettazione* as "a way of thinking, a strategy for creating relations and bringing in the element of chance, by which [we] mean 'the space of the others.' (p. 133)"

The above-mentioned five chapters are essential for underscoring the educational and cultural uniqueness of the Reggio Emilia experience. Rinaldi discusses the key principles of the Reggio Emilia approach in complex detail, thereby lending new lenses for experienced and novice practitioners of the Reggio Emilia method with which to view education. For example, the author explores teaching and learning from novel sociocultural perspectives and educational frameworks and challenges educators to reconsider and re-conceptualize their understandings of their practices. For newcomers to this philosophy, these chapters are a must-read, since many other principles of the Emilia Reggio approach are built upon the key concepts of the teacher-as-researcher; *progettazione*; and pedagogical documentation.

In the participative, communicative, and research-oriented Reggio Emilia schools, spatial environments play a cultural and sociopolitical role. Within chapters 6 and 10, the author deliberates over the concept of physical space as a language that exists as a constituent element of the formation of thought. Considering creativity as a quality of thought and life, and as an everyday right of children and adults, Rinaldi offers an image of children as people with rights rather than needs. An envisioning of the environment as a "third teacher" is put forward that creates a context in which children's creativity, curiosity, theories, and research are legitimated and listened to. Throughout the chapters of this book, an image of a critical; competent; and active child is brought forward as central to the pedagogy of the Reggio schools. Significantly, children are respected for challenging educators to produce change and dynamic movement in the systems in which they are involved, including family; society; and school. This challenges perspectives on children as obedient that aim to normalize children to function in regulated or controlled mainstream school cultures.

Rinaldi introduces further novel ideas on education in her text on Reggio Emilia. In chapter 7, in a talk with parents, Rinaldi invites them to reflect on issues such as family identities; extant sociocultural and historical changes in modern families; and familial values in relation to children's sexual identities. Other aspects of social life are also

discussed in the text, such as familial perspectives on friendship; solidarity; differences; affection; and violence among children, both as victims and as those who practice it. Written for an international conference to celebrate 40 years of experience in the Reggio municipal schools, chapter 14 concentrates on deliberations over the meanings and values attributed to anniversaries and memories in connection with the process of searching for identities across the past, present, and future. In particular, Rinaldi encourages readers to imagine and look to the future with an acknowledgement of the responsibility of the past.

In chapter 13, Rinaldi offers a conversation between her and Ettore Borghi. Borghi was a city councilor of Reggio Emilia and a philosopher. This written dialogue provides much information regarding the unique historical and cultural context of the education in Reggio Emilia schools. Topics woven throughout the conversation include a history of women, municipal schools of Reggio Emilia as the cultural expression of the city, and encounters with other cultures and the risks of international relationships for the Reggio Emilia schools.

The book finishes with a dialogue between Rinaldi and the book series editors, Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss. In chapter 15, Rinaldi revisits and extends discussion on fundamental issues, such as Leftist politics and the early women's movement; public responsibility to manage schools for young children; the importance of the unexpected and feelings of uncertainty; interdependence and 9/11; and the concept of citizenship as based on needs and rights. Moreover, Rinaldi highlights her worries about a normalization of the Reggio experience over time in connection with tensions to produce specific answers to each question in the field of education. The book ends with this dialogue, leaving many unanswered open-ended questions upon which to reflect.

This is a seminal book that I enjoy re-reading, because each time I discover new ideas and matters to upon which to reflect. The book also provides a challenge to unlearn many of the concepts that I have acquired about teaching and learning. The book pushed me to step outside my understandings of education and schooling in order to question the current dominant discourses in early childhood education. Each chapter invited me to reconsider discourse around notions of developmentally appropriate practice, learning expectations, and the concept of family and community involvement. In reading this text, the author offers examples of educational experiences that value emotions as much as knowledge. This view on education also encourages educators to look to the future with the responsibility of the past, to consider an identity for school as a public participatory place, and to place upfront children's and adults' rights. Rinaldi's articles, interviews, and discussions that are included in this book are provocative. That is, Rinaldi uses familiar terminologies and concepts with respect to early childhood education, but she offers new perspectives and unfamiliar twists on common educational ideas. In doing so, the author illustrates an educational system that is unique and interconnected with other disciplines and other foundations of knowledge and cultures.

Finally, in the spirit of the Reggio philosophy, I invite readers to consider this book as an interpretation of interpretations. The Introduction of the book is Dahlberg and Moss' interpretation of Reggio Emilia, and then Rinaldi acknowledges that her chapters are also an interpretation of the Reggio Emilia approach. Later, she writes that even Reggio is an interpretation of Reggio! These circles of interpretations make the relationship between readers and this text complex but reflective, dynamic, and open to more interpretations.

This book is an inspiration for those who wish to cross boundaries, as the Reggio educators did, in order to embrace dreams and build hope through encounter and exchange. The book encourages educators to imagine an innovative program for young children that merges theories and concepts from many different disciplines, including philosophy; architecture; science; literature; and visual communication. Furthermore, the author's comprehensive elaboration on each of the Reggio's principles provides insights into the ethical and political aspects influencing teaching and learning in Reggio Emilia schools. In this way, this book sheds much light on links between collective life; cohesive communities; reciprocal trust; and civic engagement as significant elements of the history of the Reggio Emilia city and their municipal schools. This book would be highly informative not only to those who teach and conduct research in the area of early childhood education, but also to all educators and educational researchers desirous for change and the exploration of educational possibilities for the place of schools in democratic societies.

References

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