



Our Montessori Journey with Reggio:

LIVING WITH PARADOX AND DUALITIES

By Beth MacDonald

Beth MacDonald is the Executive Director of MacDonald Montessori Child Care in St. Paul, Minnesota. Beth and her staff have been actively exploring the Reggio philosophy for 10 years. She and her staff have participated in three study tours to the Reggio municipal preschool program. Beth is also a Guiding Board member of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance.

MacDonald Montessori Child Care is currently in its 19th year as a non-profit center of 175 children, infants through school age, and thirty staff, located near downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. We spent our first eight years combining the Montessori philosophy with a half-day program of music, art, drama and movement. A core group of Montessori teachers felt strongly that the development of creativity was not encouraged enough in the Montessori classroom of learning materials, so we offered exploration of the arts in the other half of the children's day.

We began hearing about the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy in 1989, and were immediately intrigued with the beautiful environments and sense of passionate commitment of their educators. We began our search to learn more. It would be another five years before we attended our first workshop and encountered our Italian colleagues, Amelia Gambetti [currently, Reggio Children Coordinator and Liaison for Consultancy in Schools], Carla Rinaldi [currently, Reggio Children Pedagogical Consultant] and Veà Vecchi [former atelierista or studio teacher at Diana School in Reggio], in Washington D.C. at a conference at the Model Early Learning Center (MELC). During this conference, we were moved to tears, while listening to the stories and seeing the images of the children of Reggio Emilia. We knew, at very deep level, our view of the child and our hearts were shifting. Since that first encounter, we have had many earth-shaking experiences, some

enlightening and some painful, in our attempt to integrate the Montessori philosophy with the Reggio philosophy.

Our first enlightening experience began after that first conference, when I asked Amelia Gambetti to visit our school. Several weeks later, to my great surprise, Amelia agreed to come to Minnesota and meet with our staff in October 1994. During that first visit, we learned that Amelia always brings small to medium-sized earthquakes along with her, and the platelets beneath our school felt their first shift. She has returned nine times, including twice by telecommunication from Italy. Jennifer Azzariti, the former studio teacher from the MELC in Washington D.C.; Ashley Cadwell, Louise Cadwell and Chuck Schwall from the St. Louis-Reggio Collaborative; Mary Hartzell from First Presbyterian Nursery School in Santa Monica; and Lella Gandini, U.S. Liaison for the Dissemination of the Reggio Approach, have also consulted with us. In our exploration with the Reggio philosophy over the past 10 years, we have experienced resistance, infatuation, paralysis, fear, excitement, commitment, paralysis, frustration, struggle, exhaustion, recommitment, ecstasy, doubt and, once again, paralysis. But we have persisted in our journey.

The Montessori and Reggio philosophies each have their own energies. The following are words that we have chosen to describe our experiences with both approaches.

- The MONTESSORI energy is individual, sequential, ordered, independent, linear, historical, masculine, pre-determined, methodical, rigid, an internal process, controlled movement, structured, expected, predictable.

The REGGIO EMILIA energy is group-centered, cooperative, collaborative, social, open-ended, spiral, an expressive process, new age, feminine, flexible, spontaneous, serendipitous, open movement, fluid, freely expressive.

- MONTESSORI has a pre-determined curriculum and materials set up by the teacher, with the information flowing from the teacher to the children; hypotheses are adult established; the emphasis is of a vertical nature.

REGGIO-inspired learning is determined by the children and teachers in collaboration, in a co-learning context with the ideas flowing

between children and teachers; an expressive approach; problem solving and hypotheses developed within the triangle of child - teacher - parent interaction; the emphasis is horizontal.

- MONTESSORI classroom walls are traditionally bare and visually quiet to focus the children's attention on the learning materials on the shelves, although ours were not.

REGGIO EMILIA classroom walls are filled with documentation of the children's explorations and experiences - photos, conversations and visual expressions; the walls of the environment are used as a tool of reflection and revisiting by the children, parents and teachers.

- The visual arts of clay, paint, collage, drawing, wire and the verbal arts of music, dance, movement, drama are not a priority in the MONTESSORI classroom.



In REGGIO, these modes of expression are seen as languages of the child - a hundred, thousand languages, giving children a vehicle for expression and development.

In our view, there are several points of intersection and connection between the Montessori philosophy and the Reggio philosophy. Both follow the child and enjoy a prepared environment; in fact, both see the environment as the third teacher. Both approaches foster and encourage aesthetically beautiful schools, indoors and out.

In both approaches, parents are important; however,

the Reggio schools view the parents as an essential partner in the schools. In my estimation, Montessori and Reggio both see the child as competent, resourceful and independent. In the Reggio philosophy, the child is viewed as rich and powerful with rights rather than needs.

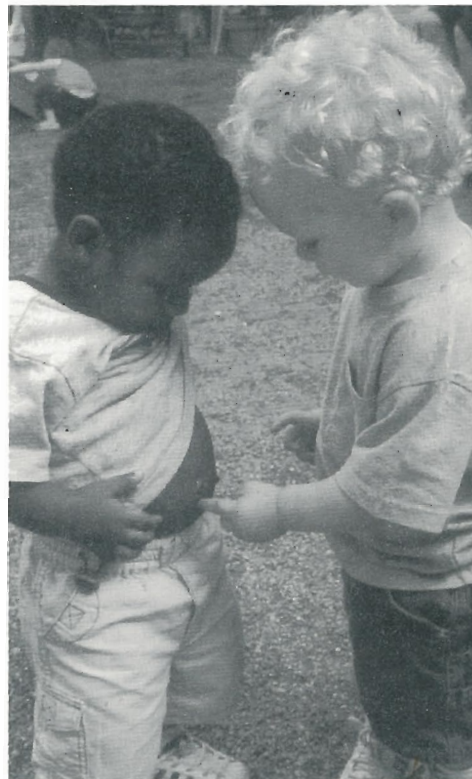
Considering these differences and similarities, we faced major challenges trying to integrate these two philosophies. Why did we continue in our exploration? Many of the obstacles seemed insurmountable. There were many stages in our development, which would explain our desire to move ahead with our feet in two different worlds.

PHASE ONE:

Infatuation

Think of the first time you fell in love or found a new friend. You are enthralled, excited, filled with the promise of a new life and new experiences. You are blinded by your enthusiasm. We call the first phase of our development, from 1994-1996, our "infatuation" phase. Amelia came to our school four times and nothing visible changed. We listened and read, and met with our parents and listened again. We were enthralled but had no clue where to begin. I have often wondered what Amelia was thinking during those two years. I now believe that the changes that occurred during this time were completely internal on our part.

After I went to Reggio Emilia in 1996, I returned home and welcomed Amelia back to St. Paul for a consultation visit. Pat Daly, our Assistant Director, and I announced to Amelia, in all seriousness, that we



had figured out what we were going to do. Since we didn't feel the two philosophies could be integrated, we were going to have a Montessori program in the morning and a Reggio program in the afternoon! Amelia frowned and said, "You can have only one program. We are very interested in watching your exploration and integration of the Montessori and Reggio philosophies. Why don't you begin?"

We were mystified and paralyzed. We chose to start with the environment, as it was easier than changing staff behavior. We began writing down our observations and tape recorded some conversations. It helped us reflect back and project for the future. Our

beginning documentation was sparse but contained many clues.

PHASE TWO:

Coming Together/ Beginning Changes

Large structural changes came first. Since the beginning, our school had two preschool programs: two Montessori classrooms and two child care classrooms for music, art and drama. The children and staff switched rooms at noon. We knew, in 1994, that if we were to be inspired by Reggio and make our environments personally reflective of the children, parents and teachers in that room, we couldn't share the space. At first, we tried to defend our separated classrooms to Amelia, who asked, "Why do you change children and staff in the middle of the day?" I explained that the staff liked it and are often tired of certain children by the middle of the day. Amelia then asked, "What do the children do when they are tired of you?" We had no response.

We met with parents and staff to hear their feedback. A parent commented, "We trust that you and your staff have researched this new philosophy. We trust the experiences our children have had with you in the past and we will eagerly support you in the future." We felt encouraged to move ahead. However, many staff members were resistant to this change. They were comfortable with the familiar and feared the unknown. But if we were to experiment with time and schedule, we needed the same children and staff together all day. These were expensive changes. We went to the bank, and got a loan to divide some space and create four new classrooms. Parent reaction to this new arrangement was positive. They were thrilled to have two teachers, rather than four, with their children all day. The children and the parents felt a new sense of home and belonging.

A new addition to our program happened at the same time. When I returned from Reggio in the summer of 1996, I

was so inspired by their infant and toddler programs that we opened our first infant room a month later. My granddaughter, Paige, was one of the first eight babies. We have since opened a second infant room with a total of 24 babies in both rooms.

We knew the Reggio schools were filled with light and the outdoors were brought inside through the windows. The windows were used for reflection, a sense of transparency and a place for the visual expressions of children. Brightly colored curtains covered our large, expansive windows. It was our desire to make a previous parochial school look homey. We were very attached to the curtains. Shannon O'Connor, who has taught in our school since 1990, said at the time (tearfully), "I know when I go on my maternity leave, you will take down my curtains." "Right," I said. The removal of the curtains symbolized the earth shaking changes happening around us and within us. We were very attached to the curtains, the brightly decorated bulletin boards, the teacher-made materials and mobiles. We had a wonderful, creative



time, as teachers, "preparing" the environment for the children. All this was changing but reluctantly, I might add.

Here are some changes we put into place during this time:

- development of the entryway as a school identity space and parent information area
- communication centers
- creating a studio or *atelier* from the former staff room
- focus on documentation; making the environment personally reflective of the children, parents and teachers and their relationships to each other through sharing children's projects and learning

through children's conversations, photos, visual expressions

- evaluated our schedules and sense of time, slowing everything down and being more purposeful
- began weekly collaboration meetings among the staff in each classroom rather than monthly staff meetings
- family panels, classroom photographs, cubby photographs and symbols for each child
- removal of all teacher-made materials and commercially-made materials
- use of only real photos in books and displays (no cartoons)
- neutralizing (cream, white, gray) all the walls and bulletin boards

PHASE THREE:

Power Struggle – Montessori and Reggio

As in every relationship, there are many power struggles. When two equals come together, one can't overcome the other; each needs acknowledgement and space. Each partner needs to be listened to and respected. Many compromises are made on the road to stability, acceptance and the development of a new identity. That new identity became the "we" system.

After our phase of beginning changes, we reconnected to our Montessori roots, trained several more staff in Montessori and purchased new Montessori materials, in an attempt to balance out our journey into the Reggio philosophy. While important, the Montessori reconnection was strange and unfamiliar. We realized, in our dialogue with the traditional Montessori training program, that we had changed. It's like returning home to visit after you get married; your identity and view of yourselves in this new relationship is forever altered. We had a new identity - our own. Amelia has repeatedly encouraged us to be who we are and not to try to be a Reggio school. "The Reggio schools are in Italy. You have your own identity, value and personality," Amelia has said to us many times.

In any stage of a relationship, people make choices to end or to continue on the shared journey. Sometimes people also make choices "to take a vacation from each other." I think that happened to us many times. When staffing issues, parent issues, licensing issues, financial or energy issues overwhelmed us, we moved into a state of paralysis to cope and put our emphasis on being able to open our doors everyday. Anyone who is involved in an early childhood program knows that many days, opening your doors is a miracle.

Power struggles involve resistance, conflict and pain. Resistance to change is strong in many educators. I have always been mystified that teachers, who work with children who are filled with energy, exuberance and strong will, are not more flexible, more receptive to new ideas, more open-ended in their thinking. The only explanation for the rigidity, which I have seen in other teachers and myself, is that the challenges of being with children everyday cause us to try to control, contain and manage our life with them. In the past, a set, prescribed curriculum had been our greatest ally because it is easily repeatable every year.

Some of our most sobering moments have been when we thought we were finished . . . when we had to rethink, restart and retreat from a path we thought was "the answer."

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embracing struggle has been a huge challenge on a daily basis. -Beth MacDonald



Another challenge came from Amelia: "Is there some law that says you must explore apples with children every September and insects every spring? Don't you think children have other curiosities?" In some ways, we had an advantage in the struggle with curriculum. Maria Montessori encouraged the preparation of the classroom with many materials and felt the teacher's role was "to follow the child." But the Montessori form of curriculum can be just as rigid as traditional early childhood curriculum, with little deviation from the structure of the materials. Several Montessori teachers left over the years, as they did not agree with the direction we were taking on our journey. Other staff left because exploring Reggio ideas did mean deeper work, more challenges and a rethinking of the way they were trained to be teachers.

Resistance to change is a strong emotion. Our lives are so demanding, challenging and stressful that keeping everything consistent and controlled becomes a "knee jerk response." The Reggio Emilia philosophy challenges us to rethink, refigure and reflect on our view of the child, our view of the daily life of children (curriculum), the role of the teacher, the role of the parents and the role of the environment. There is no end to the challenge. There is a

wonderful cartoon posted at one of the Reggio-inspired schools in St. Louis, showing a group of teachers climbing the "Reggio Mountain." The teacher, who is highest on the mountain, yells down to the rest, "There is no top!!" Some of our most sobering moments have been when we thought we were finished . . . when we had to rethink, restart and retreat from a path we thought was "the answer." Accepting conflict, disagreements and embracing struggle has been a huge challenge on a daily basis.



PHASE FOUR:
Commitment

At some point, there was no turning back. As Sandy Burwell, our studio teacher, reflected, "We left the shore in a boat containing everything we thought we would need. We left not knowing on which distant shore we would arrive. The scariest part of our journey was in the middle of the ocean when we couldn't see the land we left or the land ahead. Our boat was tossed about by many storms and we were most afraid. We finally saw a glimpse of the land ahead, and were confident and encouraged we would put our feet on solid ground again."

I think we are now in the commitment phase but this is difficult to tell, because the phases have not necessarily been linear or followed a chronological order. We have been on a spiral, and have revisited and re-entered phases along the way. Connecting, combining and integrating the two philosophies has always been our focus but now, we are digging into the heart of the issue, in terms of the role of the adult and the development of the classroom. We have used our Montessori classrooms to consider the question asked of the Italian educators many times, "What do the other children do when a small group of children are exploring their interests?" Children in the Montessori classroom are encouraged to operate independently and pursue their own interests among the materials in a prepared environment. This has helped our work

with small groups of children but the challenges of daily caregiving and redirecting children continue to derail us.

Combining the housekeeping, building, dramatic play, art, creative movement, drama, music, traditional toy and manipulative areas of our previous child care classrooms with the Montessori classroom areas of Practical Life, Sensorial, Math, Language, Geography, Science and Writing has been an ongoing experiment as we struggle with Amelia's challenge to have "one program." We continue to redesign our classroom environments daily. If you walked our environment today, you would see the following areas:

- Housekeeping, Dramatic play, & Practical Life combined
- Sensorial & Building areas combined
- Math & Science combined
- Language, Writing, Communication Center combined
- Geography
- Art area or Mini-atelier
- Water or Sensory tables
- Book area/Puppet area combined
- Group meeting area/Music

Our large muscle areas are separate from the classrooms. They include: two playgrounds, a grassy area next door, a large community room downstairs, several parks, and a residential and commercial neighborhood to explore.

The most persistent and persuasive challenge has been to shift our vision to see what the children are really doing in the classrooms every day, to see the interactions, to hear their real conversations, to record these explorations and to share them with the parents, children and co-workers. Another challenge from Amelia was, "There are elephants walking across your classrooms every day and you are focusing on the ants." For example, AnneMarie, one of our kindergarten teachers, observed a group of children who rushed in each morning and sat in an area of the room where the sun shone in brightly. They began experimenting with the shadows of their bodies and

objects that they found or brought with them. She observed this activity as she was preparing for the day, and greeting children and parents. It went on for weeks and only lasted the first hour of the day because the provocateur - the Sun - moved. As she discussed this in a collaboration meeting weeks later, she realized she had missed an opportunity. She could have supported the children's curiosity by placing a recorder in their midst and/or sat close to them with paper and pencil to transcribe their conversation. Co-teachers could have taken photos and panels could have reflected their ongoing explorations. Parents could have participated, and supported their experiments with materials and provocations at home.

Seeing and seizing these opportunities and changing our behavior, as teachers, is our current and greatest challenge. As a result of what we have learned from the educators in Reggio along with the inspiration

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from Maria Montessori's words, "Follow the child," I believe we are now better able to interpret what we observe. The children usually show us the way. They have rediscovered their interest and have named their classroom, "The Reflection Room."

Paradoxes and dualities are a part of everyone's life and they have been with us every step of the way . . . hope and disappointment, structure and freedom, joy and sorrow, night and day, order and spontaneity. We keep one foot in each philosophy and the dance is created as we move back and forth between the two. We hold the tension between the two, and know that growth and wisdom, and the journey happen in the dance.

In the Reggio
Philosophy,
the child is
viewed as
rich and
powerful
with rights
rather than
needs

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