Lasting Learning Inspired by the Reggio Emilia Philosophy: Professional Development Experience Within the Chinese Context

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LASTING LEARNING INSPRIRED BY THE REGGIO EMILIA PHILOSOPHY: A Professional Development Experience Within the Chinese Context

By Wen Zhao with the collaboration of Carolyn Pope Edwards, Joan Youngquist and Wenzuo Xiong.

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I was a faculty member at the Ruth Staples Child Development Laboratory at the University of Nebraska, when I was introduced to the first edition of The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. I was fascinated by how the educational principles and practices developed by Loris Malaguzzi enabled the children in Reggio Emilia to reach their developmental potential. I decided to study the Reggio Emilia approach further in relation to my work with student teachers. The more I studied, the more I realized the trend of early childhood education was moving toward supporting fundamental relationships among members of the learning community in order to enhance child-centered learning.

In 2000, I became the educational program director for Half the Sky Foundation. Half the Sky Foundation was organized by a group of American parents, led by Jenny Bowen, who had adopted Chinese orphans from Chinese Social Welfare Institutions. After seeing their own daughters become happy and healthy in a warm and stimulating environment in the United States, these parents wanted to give something back to the children (predominantly girls) who still remained in the institutions in China. Therefore, an educational program called the Little Sisters Program was developed, integrating Reggio Emilia principles, Chinese early childhood practice, and North American ideas about teacher development and preparation. Half the Sky believes that Malaguzzi’s principle, “education based on relationships,” is fundamental for orphanage children because they have fewer opportunities to form close and caring relationships with people and with their environment. The goal of Half the Sky Foundation is to enrich the lives
and enhance the prospects of babies and children in China who still wait to be adopted as well as those who will spend their childhood in orphanages.

With the support and collaboration of Carolyn Edwards, my doctoral advisor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, I developed a professional development curriculum for the teachers we were hiring for the Little Sisters Preschool Enrichment Programs, serving children aged 18 months to 7 years. Currently, I provide supervision and professional development every eight weeks at 11 orphanages in China. There are about 60 teachers working in the Little Sisters Programs, and they serve over 200 children. There are also Infant Nurture Centers for children under 18 months, and Big Sister Programs for children over seven.

The typical Chinese classroom emphasizes harmony, order and teacher authority. Children are expected to follow the rules, and teachers are taught that the role of a teacher is to “deposit” knowledge into the child in order to meet the child’s need for knowledge. In the traditional Chinese worldview, children are totally dependent on adults to gain knowledge and not capable of learning about the world without adults’ full guidance and advice. The classroom is usually neat, clean and colorful, and sophisticated art by the teachers is displayed. There is a good deal of practice and memory work in large group settings, and opportunities to learn artistic and physical skills in such areas as painting, drawing, music, drama and physical exercise. China has always been a crowded society, and today the nation has grown to over 1.2 billion people. Preschool classes usually have 30 children per teacher, while primary classrooms may have up to 50 children. The traditional basis of Chinese social organization is the extended family, with a hierarchy based on generation and gender. Perhaps because of these factors, Chinese people believe that children need and desire to learn to live respectfully together and to find their place in a dense, complex and exciting social life.

China is also a rapidly changing society. Many Chinese educators and researchers have become highly aware of the demand for reform in early childhood education. They have listened to Western professionals and have begun to realize that promoting emotional health is far more important than pushing cognitive gains in the early years. The Reggio Emilia approach has become a hot topic in China today because it challenges teachers to re-evaluate their perceptions of how young children learn best. We have found that traditional approaches do not work well with all children, such as orphaned children, who
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do not have the emotional resilience and support of children with families. Of course, cultural traditions are resistant to change, and people must always be careful not to lose the strength of tradition when incorporating new ideas.

In order to introduce new concepts about children, teaching and learning, I began a one-month training institute for the teachers each time that Half the Sky opened a new program. On the first days of the training institute, I asked the teachers to engage in role-reversal activities so that they could experience the way a child thinks and feels. The teachers began to understand that the adult-child relationship can impact the child’s perceptions of her environment, people around her and herself. The teachers realized that when they themselves felt unworthy and powerless, they believed they couldn’t accomplish much. This insight helped them to understand the feelings of orphan children who often exhibit withdrawal in learning situations. Before the training, when a teacher asked a child to do something, the most common response was “I don’t know how to do it,” “I am not able to do it” or “You do it for me.” As a result, the teachers believed that the developmental delays in orphanage children, particularly behavioral and psychosocial problems, were inevitable.

During our work together, the teachers realized that the children’s learning problems stemmed from the attitudes of adults, who did not understand the children. The teachers began to understand that the cognitive delays, behavioral and psychological problems indicated that children were longing for a relationship with constant, loving adult figures. With these insights, the teachers became more open to establishing close bonds with each individual child in their group.

Following this work on teacher-child attachment, I began to introduce the Reggio Emilia philosophy and approach to curriculum and long-term projects. The first encounter resulted in a great deal of confusion among the teachers. When I showed them slides and documentation from the Reggio Emilia infant-toddler centers and preschools, the teachers responded that the environments didn’t look like classrooms to them. They had not been trained to follow children’s interests, and the documentation from Reggio Emilia challenged their observation skills. They began to learn to pay special attention to each individual child, to ordinary moments and to the classroom environment as important parts of teaching and learning.

A teacher named Wenzuo Xiong wrote in her journal during the initial sessions: “I am very confused, anxious and worried after learning what is expected of a Half the Sky teacher. The Reggio Emilia approach is so foreign to me, from the way I was taught, raised and trained. Is it possible to use a Western approach in our Chinese cultural system? How can I do well without structured lesson plans to follow? How will children react if we let them decide what they want to do? I am so afraid that the children will be wild and out of control.”

The teachers did daily observations of each child and spent time playing, talking and hugging each of them. They learned to listen and observe children carefully, and to follow the children’s eyes and responses to see
Learning to document has helped the teachers to understand each child as a whole, competent being and also to collaborate with one another, and take control of self-evaluation and classroom decision-making. Each teacher collects photographs, notes and examples of all of her children's work and ordinary moments. These are put into an album called a memory book, which records the unfolding story of the child in the Little Sisters Program, and becomes a childhood history for these orphanage children. Children often explore their memory books, which we believe must help them to develop their sense of self and identity (an autobiographical or narrative self that provides an integrated view of the self over time and is critical to development). The memory book belongs to the child, and goes with the child whenever the child leaves the institution. Short excerpts from the memory books are also sent out at regular intervals to donors who sponsor individual children, as we believe they give a meaningful glimpse into the world of a child.

As an example, the memory book of YuanHui, age 6, follows her changes from a time when she was angry and unable to get along with the other children. Her teachers began to build trust with her and promised they would help her find ways to make friends. YuanHui then revealed the source of her insecurity by telling her teacher that she liked to play with her doll because “the doll does not tease me for being ugly.” YuanHui has a black birthmark under her nose, and this caused her to be teased by her peers. The teachers spoke to the other children and the teasing stopped. YuanHui began to open up to her teachers, and revealed her emotional and cognitive growth in her drawings. Here is her first drawing of one of her teachers, and then two drawings of the same teacher that she made just one month later. The second drawings portray both sad and smiling expressions in beautiful detail. These drawings of her teacher’s feelings marked the beginning of many dramatic changes in YuanHui’s behavior and attitudes.

By the following fall, YuanHui was not just going along with other children’s ideas, but also thinking for herself. She had many friends and had grown rapidly in logical thinking, focus and patience. By age 7, she had become a classroom leader in discussions who provided many creative ideas in project work.

what interested them, and what might be a “sparkle point” that could develop into a project. It didn’t take long for the teachers to see the changes in the children. The children who had never talked before began to use words; the ones who never smiled began to laugh; the ones who had always used negative behaviors to get attention began to cooperate in the classroom; the ones who always withdrew began to play with other children.

One teacher named Pu shared this experience during the reflection session: “I told one child that I was her new Pu teacher, not the old one. When she saw me two days later, she approached me very differently. Instead of pulling back the way she usually did, she ran into my arms. I asked her, ‘Do you like the new Pu teacher?’ The child said, ‘Yes, I like you as the new Pu teacher because you are now at my same level. Now I can see you so clearly. I can see your whole face.’” The comments from the child were so powerful that the teacher’s eyes filled with tears as she recounted this story. It was the first time she and the other teachers were able to encounter the heart of a child, and also the first time a child let the teacher enter her world. After this, the common response of the Little Sisters Program children became, “Let me do it,” “I know how” and “I want to try.” The dramatic changes in children’s responses and their willingness to accept new challenges demonstrated their trust of the new environment.

As our professional development project evolved, I asked the teachers to think about their ultimate goal for the children. Xiong wrote in her journal, “It was Ms. Zhao’s challenge that broke down my resistance to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. I began to question whether our traditional teaching practice could result in successful learning by the children. Is it our purpose simply to pass on knowledge and have the children copy skills from adults, or should we strive to go beyond that? I realized that our professional responsibility is to provide our children with tools and opportunities that help them explore the world around them, and develop competence and confidence in their own learning.”

In the beginning, it was not that easy for the teachers to form a new image of the child. We asked them to make regular observations of individual children.
We have faced many challenges in blending Reggio Emilia concepts with Chinese educational philosophy, including issues of teacher confidence, fears of risk-taking and reluctance to make decisions. My own Chinese cultural background has helped me to understand the psychological well being of teachers who live in a hierarchical and authority-oriented society. Teachers have the same self-awareness problems as children, and teacher development becomes one of the priorities in ongoing professional development.

From the beginning of our work together, I try to focus on each teacher's success. Every day we meet, I conduct a session for the teachers to share one another's positive experiences. I also provide many opportunities for teachers to become comfortable with their creativity and their unique styles of working with children. They come to see their own capabilities in making decisions. They move from the fear of talking about themselves to offering vivid and enthusiastic discussions about their own learning. They gain the valuable ability to take the perspectives of the orphanage children, and become more compassionate and empathetic toward the children. They develop a comprehensive understanding of the children. Some teachers have now grown in their professional skills to the point that they are workshop leaders and mentors to other teachers.

While integrating the Reggio Emilia concepts within the Chinese cultural context, we do not intend to copy what teachers and children have done in other places, or transfer the Italian culture to the Chinese setting. In order to make Reggio Emilia principles come alive for our context, we, as international educators, must understand our own cultural background, the strengths and values that are shared throughout our society. We have to develop our own particular and culturally strengthened context that integrates outside ideas into our belief systems and values, in order to solve our own problems.

One good example of how we are doing this relates to one of the biggest challenges felt by Little Sisters teachers: how to help the children transition to the local primary schools. The Chinese primary school system is still quite traditional in philosophy and emphasizes obedience of the children. Teachers make all the decisions and traditional classroom behavior is required. Half the Sky teachers worried about how the
children will adjust to this system, after speaking out for themselves, and freely expressing their ideas and thoughts in the Little Sisters Program. How will the children react to strict primary school teachers, after coming to see adults as learning partners and supporters in their learning adventure? The challenge, as they see it, is in bringing the innovative philosophy from Reggio Emilia into the Chinese setting in a way that gives the children more confidence and resilience to cope with the reality of their society.

The Hefei Little Sisters Program was one of the first two programs started by Half the Sky Foundation. The teachers and children there have worked for three years on the problem of transition to community public school. The first year, the teachers were unsure about how to help the children get ready for primary school. The month before primary school, they had the children do drills to memorize math facts and Chinese characters. The teachers reported that the children seemed absent-minded and apathetic, and did not learn well. The children were totally different than when they were engaged in projects. The teachers became frustrated and concluded that they couldn’t combine academic preparation with the Reggio-inspired curriculum.

The second year, however, the teachers became more confident about this transition. They reflected on their past year’s experience and realized that they hadn’t understood much about the Reggio Emilia approach when they had tried to help children get ready for primary school. The year before, they had a more simplistic understanding about what they thought happened in Reggio Emilia preschools. In the second year, they realized that they had missed out on the fundamental goal of providing rich learning opportunities for children so that they could explore, investigate and develop logical thinking in a way respectful of their different developmental levels. In thinking about all of this, the teachers realized that teachers are learners, too.

The Hefei teachers began to introduce school readiness skills during the evolving process of each project. This time, the teachers became more observant of children’s interests that had the potential to lead into the development of academic skills. For example, when children became engaged in studying numbers during a project called “Our Own House,” the teachers encouraged children to find out how to write “house” in Chinese, how to count out the floors and doors of a building, and how to write down the numbers. In order for people to see the numbers and words clearly, the children decided to practice their handwriting. Therefore, the school readiness skills required by the local schools were woven beautifully into the ongoing curriculum and yet, children were full of enthusiastic learning about mastering these skills. Thus, the teachers began their own journey of
elaborating Reggio Emilia concepts for their own teaching situation, which they called “blending West into East.” They shifted their focus from what Reggio Emilia teachers might do to how and why they might do it. This shift enabled them to see how the experience of Reggio Emilia can be transformed to come alive in other cultures.

The third year, the children and the teachers made another leap forward. Based on their past experiences, they started a long-term project that lasted for over half a year. It was called, “How can I find my way to my new school from our orphanage?” The teachers began by appreciating the children’s interest in maps. The children studied the routes around their orphanage and drew a large map that included familiar places like their living quarters and preschool. Then it was extended to include places outside the orphanage. The children went out into the community and visited various places that they passed on their way to the local primary school. They studied different signs in the streets and the bus stops, stores, hospitals and office buildings. They finally visited the school that they would attend and interviewed the children there. Then, back in their dramatic play area, they created a model school room just like the ones they had seen in their local primary school. They re-experienced and anticipated what that school environment felt like.

The children had already drawn maps of the orphanage and community. Now they went on to use different media, including constructions with blocks and other materials, using photos of each place for the maps, and mud (an excellent substitute for clay, which is unavailable) to build a three-dimensional map to demonstrate how they could get to their new school. During the final stage, the children completed a giant painting of the route from the orphanage to their new school. This painting started in the hallway on the first floor of their building and continued all the way up to the fourth floor, transforming the whole building. In this grand work, the children illustrated in clear and vivid ways, often with words painted next to the images, the various buildings, traffic lights, bus stops and numbered bus routes, cross walks and trees on the way, coming finally to the destination, their new school. No longer were they simply children “in” an institution but instead, they had begun to transform the look and feel of their place, to the delight of their teachers and the very supportive administrators, who direct the orphanage and welcome the Half the Sky Foundation as respected partners.

During the entire process, under their teachers’ careful guidance and encouragement, the children mastered spatial concepts such as distance and proximity, math concepts such as addition and subtraction, and

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literacy skills such as reading and writing, always with enthusiasm and passion. Because the children had such a strong interest in writing, the teachers created a “literacy corner” with cards for all of the words they had learned in the project, printed out in Chinese characters and with phonetic symbols that reminded the children how to pronounce each word. Surprisingly enough, through this project, these children living in the orphanage came to master more school readiness skills than some of the community children they met in school the next year.

Our journey together with Half the Sky teachers demonstrates that the Reggio Emilia approach can not be transported around the globe without respecting its basic principles and philosophy about children and education. As one of the teachers commented, “We need to capture the soul of the Reggio Emilia approach.” With this soul in mind, Half the Sky teachers continue to evolve deeper understandings to better serve the children they love.

REFERENCES:

*Drawings by YuanHui, a child at the Hefei Children’s Social Welfare Institution in the Anhui province of China. Photos of the Little Sister’s Program teachers and children courtesy of Wen Zhao.*