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Reggio Emilia Inspiration for Early Education in China: The Case of Zhejiang Province

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The progressive spirit of the Reggio Emilia experience belongs not to Italy alone, but to the whole world. In this paper we would like to discuss how it is being received in the Zhejiang Province in China, as an example of its promise and potential to influence early childhood reform. In this way, we hope to contribute to international dialogue about Reggio-inspired education and to increase understanding about how its principles and practices are spreading to China, a vast and complex society with non-Western cultural-political traditions and institutions.

The Reggio Emilia experience in early childhood was first introduced into China by Xiwen Zhu of Beijing Normal University, in a 1999 article published in the *Journal of Educational Development*. Afterwards, scholars and educators throughout the country began to discuss and pursue the ideas. The intensity of this discussion is indicated by a Chinese internet search using terms, “Reggio Emilia” and “project approach,” which yielded 768 magazine or journal articles, 12 masters thesis, and nearly 200 monographs and translations, all since 1999. Chinese early childhood educators, particularly academics and scholars, have shown themselves to be very curious and welcoming of the Reggio approach, demonstrating their openness to international ideas. Today, many discussions of early childhood theory and practice address or include central concepts of the Reggio experience, for example, concerning the project approach, active learning by children, and partnership between home, school and community.

Why is the Reggio Emilia approach (which we will shorten to REA for this paper) so compelling to Chinese educational scholars? We believe the answer lies in the interaction between the philosophy of REA and the social and cultural context of early childhood education in contemporary China. In the last decade, the country, with its one-child policy and booming economy, has undergone breathtaking social and cultural transformation. As a result, young parents today not only have not have an increased standard of living but also a focused attention on their precious single offspring. Across the nation, concern about education for young children has reached unprecedented importance. Increasingly families hope for their child to receive a high-quality preprimary education; we call it “kindergarten” (as opposed to the American term, “preschool”). Chinese parents are coming to realize that education is a lifelong endeavor and to believe that a high-quality kindergarten experience will get their child off to a strong start--able to express creativity, respect for others, and the dignity of life. In response, educational institutions, particularly the universities, are trying to find ways to address family desires and are seeking to understand and import the most advanced educational ideas to be found.

Certainly, in the past decade, China is becoming more and more open to the outside world. Early childhood education in particular has been experiencing dramatic reforms, in which the importance of humanistic education is greatly highlighted. The concepts of child-centered, practice-focused, and democratic approaches to teaching have influenced national early childhood policies (Lau, 2012). For example, in 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued *Kindergarten Education Guidelines*, which promote an emphasis on children as lifelong learners and require teachers to respect children as individuals, developing beings, and partners with adults in learning. The trend of this reform movement has obliged the academic scholars to offer new ideas of education, as well as new social and physical environments, all designed to reflect changing beliefs, values, and customs. The scholars are reflecting more on their image of the child--a person with power and status. Their reflections find points of correspondence with the basic principles of REA, which seem to be just what they are striving for. Thus, in order to support the reform of early childhood education, the academic scholars feel a special regard for the Reggio Emilia approach and take into their hearts and minds such rich and stimulating ideas as emergent curriculum, longterm projects, and the “hundred languages of children.”

The theory of REA has found a fertile soil in China, but what about the practices? Let us just take Zhejiang Province as an example. Zhejiang is one of the most prosperous and rapidly developing provinces in China; it is also one of the most open to the outside world, due to its location as a port city on the East China Sea. Its economic productivity ranks second in the country, and it has a relatively developed educational system as well. In 2009, its index of education opportunity was the highest among all the provinces of China. In 2010, fully 92 percent of children aged 3- to 5-years-old were enrolled in some kind of kindergartens. Because Zhejiang lies on the seacoast and is so open to outside exchange and influence, it is always at the forefront in incorporating modern ideas in early childhood education.

A Questionnaire Study of Kindergarten Directors in Zhejiang

The first author conducted a study in 2011 to learn more about the penetration of the theory and practice of REA into this relatively developed province of China. The method involved a questionnaire and follow-up interviews administered in four of the districts of Zhejiang: Xiaoshan district of Hangzhou; Beilun district of Ningbo; Taizhou district; and Quzhou district. Of these, Hangzhou and Ningbo districts are the most developed economically and culturally, Taizhou is next, and Quzhou is the least developed. Thus, these four districts represent different economic and cultural contexts of Zhejiang and provide a representative way to look across the province in considering the way in which REA is being incorporated.

The first author and her research team handed out questionnaires to the directors of 40 kindergartens in Zhejiang, with ten kindergartens in each of the four focal districts. All of these sampled kindergartens have good reputations and enroll students

from the local surroundings. The director questionnaire contained ten questions:

1. How well do you understand the ideas of Reggio Emilia education?
(Completely, partially, or not at all?)
2. What do you think is the biggest benefit of carrying out education inspired by the Reggio approach?
3. Do you think it is necessary for China to bring in the Reggio approach?
4. Is your kindergarten seeking to implement the Reggio approach?
5. If not, do you hope to incorporate someday the Reggio approach in your kindergarten?
6. Does your kindergarten actually have the capacity and resources to incorporate the Reggio approach?
7. What is the most difficult aspect of incorporating the Reggio approach?
8. What changes would your teachers have to make in order to incorporate the Reggio approach?
9. Do you think that Montessori education or the Reggio approach is more suitable for the Chinese context?
10. Would you like for you or your teachers to receive training in the Reggio approach?

All 40 kindergarten directors were cooperative in answering the questionnaires. Their responses were as follows. On Q1, 15% answered they understand REA completely, 85 percent partially. On Q2, all of the directors said that the biggest benefit of REA is tapping the children's potentials. On Q3, likewise, all said it is very necessary to bring REA to China. However, on Q4, only 20 percent answered that they are actually carrying out REA; these directors came mainly from the two richest districts, Xiaoshan and Beilun. On Q5, 82.5 percent of the directors hope to incorporate REA, yet on Q6, 80 percent answered their kindergarten is not ready to do so, with most of these "not ready" schools coming from the poorest district, Quzhou. On Q7, 92.5 percent of directors named the most difficult aspect of incorporating REA to be the high teacher/student ratio, teacher qualifications, or the parents' educational goals for their children. On Q8, 90 percent answered that their teachers most need to change their views of children and of the role of the teacher. On Q9, 97.5 percent chose Montessori education as more suitable for China, as opposed to only 2.5 percent choosing REA. On the final question, Q10, all directors asserted they do hope to receive professional training in REA.

Features of Reggio-Inspired Practice in Zhejiang

In a Foreword to the book, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Howard Gardner says that any educational system, no matter how ideal, is always rooted in local conditions. Each one must find its own way to balance between competing objectives, such as desires of the individual and needs for the group, and find its own path of development. Thus, it cannot be transplanted mechanically. What has REA achieved in the Chinese contemporary social and cultural context?

First of all, the philosophy and pedagogy must be adapted for use in a larger classroom of children with a lower teacher/student ratio than is typical in Italy and many other Western countries. Some kindergartens in China are trying this, and are meeting some success. For example, as one director in the Xiaoshan District said:

“The Reggio approach promotes transformation of the teacher’s idea of early childhood education, improves the partnerships between and among teachers, children, parents, and the community. We are encouraged that kindergarten education can make connections between the curriculum and surrounding social and cultural environment. We used to always complain that the class was too big and chaotic for children to cooperate, but now we are happy to find out we can create a supportive environment where children are more cooperative. We rid ourselves of tight control over children and instead promote activities that children themselves organize. Our teachers become friends with children in the process of carrying out routine, and become more sensitive and aware of childrens’ feelings and moments of development.”

Compared with traditional teaching, interactions between teachers and children have improved, promoting children’s social, emotional and cognitive development. Children thrive more when teachers create nurturing, well-run settings and engaging learning opportunities. The role of the environment as a third teacher is accentuated in the large class situation.

Furthermore, the negotiated, social-constructivist curriculum in the Reggio approach must be adapted for use in China. Instead of knowledge being gradually constructed by adults and children together, each taking an inquiring stance toward the other’s constructs, in the Chinese kindergarten a pre-determined curriculum leads children to learn elements of particular domains under the guidance of the teachers. Generally speaking, kindergarten teachers are in charge of the situation, and children have to follow. Yet, influenced by ideas of the emergent curriculum, Chinese kindergartens are exploring new directions. Teachers try to create supportive relationships and environments, and to encourage enjoyment, excitement and exploration. They want children to experience appropriate levels of autonomy and independence, develop self-regulation of their behavior and emotions, and participate fully and actively in classroom activities. Of course, teachers can’t blindly follow children’s wishes and attend to their preferences all the time. Instead, they should seek to guide children, enhance children’s thinking, reasoning and verbal skills, and provide frequent and engaging opportunities to study and learn. Teachers should make plans, but their plans should be adjusted with flexibility because there is a lot that can’t be completely certain in advance. As Malaguzzi said, “to be with children is to work one-third with certainty and two-thirds with uncertainty and the new” (Gandini, 2012, p. 63). Based on this understanding, some kindergartens in China put forward the concept of the negotiated curriculum, where teachers and students assume

cooperative roles. This kind of curriculum is neither child-centered nor teacher-centered, but rather sometimes “child-originated and teacher-framed” and other times “teacher-provoked and then child-engaged” (Forman & Fyfe, 2012, p. 248). What is important is that the teachers engage children’s minds and interests in the topic posed. As one kindergarten director said:

“The negotiated curriculum requires teachers to respect children's needs and interests, empathize, and provide guidance, encouragement, and support for children’s initiatives. We shouldn’t just force-feed the curriculum and herd the children through activities according to our own thinking.”

This kind of exploration requires serious thought about the purpose of education. As one director said:

“A kindergarten is a cultural institution. It should preserve cultural values while at the same time changing in order to cultivate the next generation. In recent years, the most evident change is the simultaneous push to both indigenize and internationalize our curriculum. That is, we are trying to make our kindergartens more authentically Chinese, in order to enter into international conversation.”

Thus, in projecting projects with children in the spirit of the Reggio approach, Chinese teachers attend to guiding children to learn the Chinese culture. They design a system and set of corresponding activities and materials in line with the habits, customs, and cultural essence of the Chinese nation and seek to promote the ability of children to live effectively and independently in the contemporary society.

The Large Gap Between Theory and Practice

Although some success has been seen in the implementation of Reggio-inspired education, a large gap still remains between theory and practice. Many teachers’ educational ideas have changed, but perpetuate old style ways of doing things. Zhejiang may be at the forefront of reform and open attitudes in China, yet in the survey of 40 high-quality kindergartens, only 20 percent of the directors said they were implementing aspects of REA. In actuality, the Reggio approach hasn’t caught on in Zhejiang. There is still only lip service, or mechanical imitation of superficial characteristics. Directors think of the Reggio approach as project teaching or some new physical facilities. Many educators are confused and unsure how or what to make changes. A further disappointment is that no formal Reggio-inspired professional network or organization has been established yet in Zhejiang Province. The situation cries out for more collegial cooperation, exchange, and reciprocity.

Based on the surveys and interviews, we believe several kinds of challenges stand in the way. First, the influence of traditional teacher-centered culture makes democratic cooperation a little difficult. In Reggio Emilia, themes of democracy,

cooperation, and participation are highlighted. But with the vertical relations of authority and dependency prevailing in Chinese education and culture, it is not so easy for teachers to enter into horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation. It is very difficult to realize the essence of the Reggio approach. One director said:

“Most teachers still adhere stubbornly to the teacher-centered approach. They are used to controlling children and making them obey what they say. Teachers haven’t any awareness of being partners, co-constructors, guides, or supporters. Furthermore, teachers are not so active in interacting and having a dialogue with parents or community, either.”

Beyond the vertical authority relationships, the pressure from parents for academic skill learning is huge. One kindergarten director stated, “Parents’ forceful demands are pushing our kindergartens in the direction of an elementary school model.” Nowadays, market pressures are making the Chinese early childhood education sector ever more public/private diversified, profit-oriented, buffeted by expectations, values and competing functions. As long as China lacks sufficient educational resources—books and materials in the schools, places at the university--the contradictions between policymakers’ idealism and consumers’ pragmatic concerns are difficult to reconcile. Although in recent years China has been moving ahead with educational reforms, highlighting humanistic education and seeking to improve quality, these goals fade in the face of the reality of university entrance examinations and competition for the limited places. Everything else becomes pale and powerless, and the learning atmosphere of the school cannot change. The influence of competition for university entrances reaches down even into early childhood education. Contemporary parents are very demanding and want their children to be winners from the very start. The kindergarten director quoted above added this despairing remark:

“Parents set high demands on their only-child’s performances in literacy, mathematics, the arts, and physical sports, but especially look for rapid cognitive advance as the most crucial factor for their child being able to compete in the future. So, most kindergartens must pay special attention to the pre-academic areas, such as reading, writing, calculating and so on. Parents’ high expectations for their children, their lack of understanding of young children’s learning, and their demands for immediate outcomes pose great challenges for our kindergartens.”

Finally, kindergartens face a shortage of qualified teachers, training and networking opportunities, and facilities and equipment. According to the Zhejiang survey, the major obstacle in carrying out REA involves a shortage of these resources. For instance, the Reggio philosophy requires teachers to be partners with children—collaborative, supportive, and sensitive, and reassuring—able to facilitate the ability of all children to actively explore and learn. This can be difficult, especially for veteran teachers trained in the old style. Teachers are also used to working with

large classrooms of students. If we want to implement smaller class sizes and promote more intimate teacher/child interaction, as is typical in Western societies, we are in a more serious shortage of qualified teachers. In the Zhejiang investigation of 40 kindergartens, the average teacher/student ratio was 1:20, and remember that the selected kindergartens were all known for their high quality! In other kindergartens in the province, teacher/student ratio is much larger. The Reggio approach requires sensitive teachers who are attentive to children's words and body language. These teachers should document with words and images—recording the conversations between teachers and children as they explore. The documentation process is considered essential in Reggio Emilia, but Chinese teachers feel it is difficult to do because of the student/teacher ratios. Moreover, teachers need better working contexts. In the Reggio idea, the environment is the “third teacher.” Children have the right to a space and environment that enables complex interactive relationships with the physical and social world. Architectural structure, space configuration, rich diversity of carefully selected and arranged materials, and interesting outdoor areas and equipment attract children to ask questions, investigate, and create, and stimulate a high level of dialogue between people and things. Today, however, many Chinese kindergartens fall short in these areas.

Outlook for the Future

In an address on educational reform, Jin-Hee Lee (2010) wisely said, “By crossing geographical, cultural or disciplinary borders, we will be better able to reflect upon and learn more deeply about ourselves, and why we do what we do, through the expanded and diversified perspectives of why others do what they do” (p. 271). In this paper, we have suggested that the principles and pedagogy of the Reggio approach closely correspond to the urgent needs of current early childhood education reform and development in China. According to the survey of kindergarten directors in Zhejiang Province, the Reggio approach is widely welcomed, although many teachers don't completely understand its essence and have confusions about carrying it out in practice, feeling limited by their local contexts. Yet, small steps are being taken and the developmental trend points upward. With the breathtaking social and economic advances going on everywhere, we have seen dramatic changes in Chinese early childhood education. As Hseuh, Tobin, & Karasawa (2004) put it:

“Chinese early childhood education is currently going through a metaphorical adolescence, in which rapid but imbalanced growth and an increasing awareness of power and possibility are accompanied by the struggle to forge an identity that bridges the colonial and communist pasts with a promising and yet uncertain future” (p. 457).

The trend toward higher quality early childhood education is continuous, and it is certain to emphasize the importance of humanistic and advanced notions of early childhood education to promote reform and development .A director of a kindergarten

in Kunming said:

“Early childhood education in China has gradually rid itself the old model of transmitting knowledge to the young. We have entered an era in which early childhood education is centered on a humanistic belief, and on a view of human development as a life-long process. I feel proud of this progress” (Hsueh, Tobin, & Karasawa, 2004, p. 467).

The Reggio Emilia approach will help satisfy the quest for high-quality early childhood education. As long as we continuously strengthen research into its theory and practice, the Reggio approach will make a significant contribution to educational and cultural innovation in China. Educators there welcome experts from all over the world to come for dialogue and exchange. Many Chinese teachers have a strong desire to receive high-quality training in the Reggio approach. Without doubt, this work of working opens our vision to the fact that education can be rich, fulfilling, heartfelt, participatory, and responsive. We keep strengthening our determination to create and protect these rich experiences in our own contexts. The greater common ground will be cultivated by a belief in the power of exchange and collaboration, one which flourishes in a landscape of human relationships.

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