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Promoting Collaborative Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom: Teachers' Contrasting Conceptualizations in Two Communities

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Italy, with its emerging stature as a European leader in quality public child care, has recently become the site of much research by North Americans. Because many American and Italian psychologists share a goal of advancing new ways of understanding socialization and education in context, it is timely to begin to examine and compare methods and findings. When culturally comparative studies are considered, it is of course necessary to remember that national cultures are not unitary: there is no homogeneous "Italian" or "American" culture. Rather, attention to multiplicity, change, and inter- and intra-locale differences are an

essential part of the challenge in analyzing the cultural contexts of learning and development at home and school.

Our study should also be considered part of the endeavor in contemporary social science to transform the individualistic assumptions about science, self, and society that have become deeply ingrained in the thinking of North Americans in particular, and of most peoples of the advanced democracies as well. These assumptions have been found to have severe limits for understanding learning and thinking as inherently social processes, for describing socialization as the collective appropriation, rather than internalization, of culture (Bruner, 1986; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1991), and even, at the most pragmatic level, for working with young children in ways that best promote children's prosocial behavior, empathy, and sense of identification with surrounding reference groups. But just how do we go beyond the individual as the basic unit of analysis in psychology? Theory is slowly being built with key assistance from Vygotskian psychology, cultural anthropology, and interpretive sociolinguistics. At the same time, improved methods of collecting and analyzing data are urgently needed to determine which recommendations will lead in the most fruitful directions. As evidenced by the articles in the journal *Rassegna di Psicologia* (1992, volume IX, number 3), psychologists are on the threshold of finding new ways of seeing and then describing learning and socialization as processes of children's participation in communicative events structured by adults.

Statement of the Problem

This particular study was conducted by an intercultural team at three sites: Reggio Emilia (Emilia Romagna, northern Italy), Pistoia (Tuscany, central Italy), and Amherst (Massachusetts, U.S.A.). All three cities share the features of being small, cohesive cities with progressive political traditions and extensive early childhood services. Of the three, however, only Reggio Emilia and Pistoia have built up city-financed, city-managed systems of preprimary and infant-toddler education. Recognized throughout Italy (indeed, Europe) for their quality and innovative substance, these municipal systems are well known as places where professionals and citizens have joined together and put years of effort into creating distinctive public systems that have many noteworthy features, including (1) the ways in which children, teachers, and parents are connected into operative communities focused on the surrounding city and region; and (2) the ways in which children are stimulated toward cognitive, social, and emotional development through collaborative play and group projects. Such features tend to be quite startling and thought-

provoking to the many recent visitors from the United States, who arrive with contrasting perspectives based on North American individualist values and Piagetian assumptions about the egocentrism of young children. Far from causing the American visitors to retreat, however, the process of intercultural confrontation and exchange has proved a strong stimulus for research and discussion.

Our study, in particular, focuses on how teachers in three communities seek to promote collaboration and community in their classrooms. We seek to closely analyze the educators' working philosophies in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, and Amherst and compare them with their preferred methods of structuring children's schedules, organizing small and large learning groups, managing conflicts, dealing with sex role issues, and connecting children to wider communities outside the classroom. It is an extensive study, and in this paper we report preliminary and partial results only. Even from our preliminary analysis, however, it is evident that each of the three research sites has, as expected, a shared language: what anthropologists (D'Andrade, 1984; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Spradely, 1979) call a "distinctive discourse" or "cultural meaning system," and what psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) calls a "language of education," for framing issues of collaboration and community regarding young children. This shared language, in turn, can be related to objective practices, that is, methods of school organization and grouping of children, as well as to shared beliefs about the roles of the teacher, the nature of the child as learner, rationales for teacher intervention and guidance, and preferred styles of facilitating the learning process.

In this paper we do not address the larger theoretical problem of how psychologists can best describe learning and thinking as a social process and socialization as the collective appropriation of culture. Instead, we begin with a question that is empirical—indeed, ethnographic: namely, how the different communities of educators in our study talk about teaching and learning as co-action and co-creation of meaning. We will demonstrate that the cultural-community differences are not trivial but rather precisely related to those issues in a way that can be informative to psychologists. It is well known that the thinking of most developmental theorists, especially those influenced by the philosophical foundations of Western Europe and North America, is packaged in individualistic categories (Sampson, 1988; Schwartz, 1990; Triandis, 1989; Triandis et al., 1990). In contrast, our Italian informants, especially those from Reggio Emilia, have developed different philosophical categories not only in their minds as sets of beliefs and values, but also in practice, embodied in coherent institutions and functioning routines. These categories, we will demonstrate, posit learning as co-creation of knowledge and posit the

child as inherently social. The Reggio Emilia educators have, over the past thirty years, collectively developed a language of education that assumes a co-constructionist view of the child and of teaching and learning that is very close to that proposed by Jerome Bruner (1986) in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, as illustrated in this quotation:

I have come increasingly to recognize that most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture. It is this that leads me to emphasize not only discovery and invention but the importance of negotiating and sharing—in a word, of joint culture creating as an object of schooling and as an appropriate step en route to becoming a member of the adult society in which one lives out one's life. (p. 127)

Rather than focusing on the developing child as an autonomous learner, Reggio Emilia and Pistoia educators see education as a communal activity and sharing of culture through collaboration among children and also between children and teachers, who open topics to speculation and negotiation (see Bruner, 1986, chapter 9). The Amherst, Massachusetts, educators, in contrast, see education first and foremost as a means for promoting the development of each individual. At the same time, however, as will be shown, although their discourse is guided by Western individualistic categories, it is not exhaustively constrained by those terms. Rather, as they grapple on the theoretical level with issues of collaboration and community, and as they engage on the practical level with an actual classroom of children with its own identity and ongoing history, they too respond to the dialectic between the needs of the individual and those of the group. For all of the teachers in our study, then, we believe that their words, framed within images of everyday practice and decision making, reveal a complex picture of the meaning of collaborative learning. The interviews and discussions in the study communities provide us with alternative models of thinking about how collaboration corresponds to an image of the child, an image of the role of the teacher, and a preferred approach to structuring children's experiences. This paper will illustrate the data and point to the emerging findings by comparing some of the views on collaborative learning of the Reggio Emilia and Amherst educators.

Method

Description of Amherst and Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia, a city of about 130,000 people, is located in the Emilia Romagna region. In Reggio Emilia, the municipal early childhood program originated in cooperative schools started by parents at the end of World War II. The city currently supports twenty-two preprimary schools for children three to six years of age, as well as thirteen infant-toddler centers for children under three (Edwards et al., 1993). Children of all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds attend the programs, including special needs children; fifty percent of the city's three- to six-year-olds and thirty-seven percent of the city's children who are under three years of age are served in the municipal schools and centers.

Amherst is a town of about 35,000 people in rural western Massachusetts. Founded in 1755, it is known throughout the United States for its many fine universities and colleges located nearby, as well as for its historic town-meeting form of democratic governance and citizen participation and its long tradition of political progressivism, manifested in abolitionist efforts during the slavery era and antiwar activities during the Vietnam conflict. In terms of early childhood education, nevertheless, Amherst, while very liberal by American standards, has no unified municipal public child care system. Rather, the town is the site of multiple but piecemeal services: a town-financed central office of information and referral; one town-subsidized infant-toddler center that serves town employees' children; numerous high-quality preschools in the private domain; a network of licensed day care homes supervised by the state of Massachusetts; programs or slots for handicapped, disadvantaged, or abused preschool-aged children, financed by the city or the state; and free universal kindergarten education classrooms to serve all five- and six-year-olds as the first year of public primary education (Edwards & Gandini, 1989; Nimmo, 1992).

Interview Methods

Our methodology in all three sites involved a combination of teacher interviews with an adaptation of the "multi-vocal video-ethnography" developed by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989) and described in their book, *Preschool in Three Cultures*. In this method, videotapes of classroom activity are obtained not to document and represent the classrooms, but rather as a stimulus and starting point for a critical and

reflective dialogue with the ultimate goal of constructing a *multi-vocal video-ethnography* (Tobin, 1988; Tobin et al., 1989). Researchers systematically elicit (and record) the reactions to videotaped classroom segments of a series of cultural insiders and outsiders: the focal teachers, colleagues at their school, parents, educators and parents from other cities in their own country, and finally educators and parents from other countries. These reactions are assembled, analyzed, and interpreted by the ethnographer, who thereby takes responsibility for the final product, in a report that seeks to preserve the multiplicity of the perspectives or voices of all the people involved.

First, we selected a small group of teachers in each city to be our central informants. We wanted these teachers to be members of an educational community, that is, a coherent group of educators who possessed a shared professional language and set of core values concerning teaching. At the same time, we desired to work with informants who were considered, by their own peers and administrators, to be strong exemplars of their craft and articulate spokespersons for their values and practices. In each city, therefore, we consulted extensively with school administrators, who thereby became deeply involved in the study and indeed made good use of it for their own purposes (incorporating our research in their ongoing inservice staff development endeavors). In Reggio Emilia, where the entire municipal early childhood education system constitutes an educational community, we were directed by the central administration to work with the teachers of one preprimary school, the Scuola Diana, where the *atelierista* was the most experienced in the system and which was favored by a stable teaching staff and outstanding physical environment. In this school, which contained the standard three classrooms for three-, four-, and five-year-olds, we had done extensive slide photography and videotaping in 1988 and therefore had already established good rapport. In Amherst, in contrast, where there was no unified public early childhood system, in order to obtain a group of teachers who belonged to a self-conscious educational community, we interviewed teachers at the Common School, a highly regarded, progressive, independent school serving children ages three to twelve, with three mixed-age classrooms for preprimary children (two classrooms for three- and four-year-olds and one classroom for five- and six-year-olds) and four mixed-age primary classes.

The first stage of data gathering was *initial interviewing* to learn about the teachers' concepts of collaboration and community building. Teachers were given the questions earlier so that they could think about or talk over their answers if they wished. We asked a standard set of open-ended questions, as follows:

- Do you see learning in the age group you work with as a collaborative process? Why or why not? Can you give some examples from your classroom experience?
- How do you as a teacher foster children learning from other children in your classroom? What problems or blocks have you encountered?
- Do you see children in your age group adopting shared goals in free or structured play? Can you give some examples?
- Do you see children commenting on or responding to each other's work? How do you respond to this kind of interaction? Is it something you want to encourage or influence in any way?
- Do you see your classroom as a community? If so, in what way?
- How do you connect your children to wider communities? Can you give some examples?
- What are the limitations to the kind of community you can create with your age group of children?
- How about cross-sex relations? What are the limitations to the community and collaboration that can occur between the sexes?

The second, and most extensive, stage of data gathering involved videotaping in the teachers' classrooms during morning activity time on two occasions and then using the videotapes in a playback session called the *video-reflective interview*; this discussion with the teachers was also videotaped. The initial classroom videotapes were collected in Reggio by the teacher participants working with their art director (*atelierista*), but in the other two cities by the research team. The research team then worked together to select a series of segments for video playback, trying to include episodes representative of different kinds of social activity (teacher-child, child-child, conflictual, and cooperative). (In doing this selection, we used information gathered in the prior interviews to be sure to include the kinds of events considered important for collaboration and community building by the relevant teachers, as well as episodes we thought interesting or significant, from our own perspectives.) We also worked together to generate one or more questions to ask regarding each segment, always beginning with an open-ended request, "Tell us about this segment, in terms of the social issues involved," and followed by a

specific probe, such as, "Can you comment on this episode in terms of cross-sex relations?" The subsequent video-reflective interviews lasted two to three hours each and took place in a small group that consisted of the teacher (or co-teachers) of the pertinent classroom, sometimes other teachers from their school, sometimes one or more administrators from their system, and two or more members of the research team. They were videotaped for later analysis and later transcribed in full.

In the third and final stage of data gathering, we engaged the educators in *cross-cultural video-reflective discussions*. Gathering together all of the study participants from the city, plus many of their colleagues from other preschools interested in the research, we showed segments from the other research site and asked people to comment on what they saw that was congruent with and discrepant from their professional values, as well as what they saw that was similar and dissimilar to their own classrooms. These discussions, conducted in Reggio and Pistoia concerning Amherst, and in Amherst concerning both Italian sites, were extremely useful in revealing the most deeply held beliefs and values of the different participants, as well as some value-oriented reactions to the other system's practices.

Thus the videotape segments were never intended to capture the objective reality of the classroom: obviously, the segments were not representative in any sampling sense; and furthermore, videotape, with its complex juxtaposition of images and words, has to be interpreted to gain meaning. The meaning necessarily shifts, depending on who is looking and what they are thinking about as they look. Instead, we used video playback in a way similar to, but extending beyond, the format known as *stimulated recall* (a qualitative technique used in research on teaching to investigate individual teachers' interactive thoughts and decision making (Calderhead, 1981; Tuckwell, 1980). That is, by having the video-reflective interview take place in a group setting, we stimulated people to talk and listen to one another, to agree and disagree, and to modify their ideas as the discussion proceeded, and thus to co-construct their descriptions, interpretations, and analyses.

Preliminary Findings

The richness of our data exceeded our expectations and testifies to the strength of the video-reflection methodology as well as the articulateness and thoughtfulness of our informants. We are performing a formal textual analysis of the interview and discussion materials, looking at expressed concepts surrounding issues of collaboration and community understood in their broadest senses. This analysis is guided by the foundational

assumption that qualitative analysis should begin as soon as data are collected and continue to emerge throughout the entire project in order to construct "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nimmo, 1992). In contrast to *a priori* theory, grounded theory is more responsive to, and able to encompass, the contextual elements and multiple realities encountered in this type of qualitative research. Accordingly, therefore, the research team has developed a set of coding categories that refer to all the key words and central themes appearing in the corpus of interviews and discussions and relate to ideas concerning collaboration, cooperation, community, co-action, social exchange and connection, communication, and other related concepts (as well as their contrasts: conflicts, miscommunications, individualistic acts and values, disunities, social segregation, and so forth). The resulting set of approximately one hundred categories has been used to code all interviews and discussions, using a qualitative text analysis program. The Ethnograph (Seidel et al., 1988), which allows segments of text to be assigned multiple codings for later selective retrieval and interpretation. The findings of the study will emerge from the processes of interpretation and comparison.

In this paper, we will provide a preliminary "reading" of the data by demonstrating how distinct the contrast is between ways of approaching young children's classroom collaboration in Reggio Emilia and Amherst. In a future monograph, we will analyze all of the major concepts and themes for the three study communities: Amherst, Pistoia, and Reggio Emilia. Here, we will simply illustrate the directions that analysis will take by showing how different were two of the communities of educators, as revealed in one component of the data: their answers on the initial collaboration interview, in particular, their responses to question one ("Do you see learning in the age group you work with as a collaborative process? Why or why not? Can you give some examples from your classroom experience?"). Almost any segments of the material would have served for these present purposes; however, we have selected for comparison answers to the first question in the interview because they arose from the initial moments of the data-gathering encounter between the teachers and ourselves, and, as such, carry a particularly potent charge in terms of communication of meaning. We consider that these answers offer useful entry points to the systems of meaning that the teachers were seeking to convey to us. Furthermore, by selecting for close analysis the answers to a single question, we are able to reveal the precise differences in the discourse used by the two communities of teachers and begin to understand the similarities and differences in outlook and issues of concern for the two groups of educators. We found that the statements

made about collaboration and community in the initial interviews were then clarified, indeed, "acted out" through the social processes of the group discussions in the video-reflective interviews. The cross-cultural video-reflective discussions, finally, brought some closure to the data gathering and revealed core issues of concern to each group within itself as well as a sense of what aspects of the other community's approach were most similar and dissimilar to its own preferred ways.

The Collaboration Interview: Opening Statements of the Reggio Emilia Educators

One of the more senior teachers in the Diana School, PS, made a concise opening statement that put forward several premises we were to hear over and over in Reggio Emilia: the importance of collaboration (she calls it "co-action") to intellectual development; the need for moments of conflict as well as moments of cooperation; the unity of cognitive and affective development; the importance of the physical environment for making collaboration among children possible; and the collaborative model provided by the teachers' collective. When she used the phrase, "Here in Reggio we are convinced . . .," she made clear her sense of identification with the ongoing educational experience in Reggio Emilia. She re-emphasized this same idea at the end of her opening statement, describing her own professional formation and sense of affinity with the methods of work in her system.

PS: I do think that the children—each child—gets an advantage by staying with other children. Here in Reggio we are convinced that the cognitive learning and the affective development are tied to co-action of children and also to conflict. We are part of a project that is based on co-action of children and on the sureness that this is a good way of learning. Therefore, I find this question justified, and I see that there is learning as a collaborative process.

I can give examples. One concerns the Oil Project that we did with children. And we should also look at the physical environment [of the school] where children can stay in small groups, and where the teachers, who already cooperate among themselves, form what we call a collective. The teachers cooperate.

Actually, I am a special case [as a teacher] because I studied to be an elementary teacher. . . . I must say, I did not have much experience with young children—in fact, none; but I immediately became completely fascinated by the different

way the schools are run here. . . . From then on, I have been completely taken, and I have decided that this way of working is very congenial to me.

A second senior teacher, LR, opened her reply with a parallel declaration of belief in the validity and correctness of the Reggio Emilia method of working with small groups of children on long-term projects. She then went on to say many significant things about the use of small groups. She noted that small groups allow the teacher to readily enter the children's world and embark with them on an intellectual journey. She defined what this journey is about: asking questions and seeking knowledge. She referred to the working partnership of the fundamental Reggio triangle, teachers-children-parents, in noting how children draw their parents into their inquiries, and then the parents go to the teachers with questions. She then briefly reflected upon the fact that young children actively form their own peer relationships; through observation she has learned how important are these spontaneous groups to the process of children's becoming able to understand (communicate with) one another. Finally, she provided a long example of her project work with small groups of children and explained much about the teacher's role in Reggio, facilitating children's communication by listening for fruitful ideas, acting as the group "memory," and helping children represent their ideas in symbolic form. Here is what LR said to the opening question about fostering collaboration among young children.

LR: It is a way of working not only valid but also right. I, as a teacher, succeed in reading much more and in understanding, in staying within the group as an adult. There is much interest even from me. It is a relationship between me and the children: my staying with them becomes a way to help them to face a problem. I grow up with the children. I work in a state of uncertainty because I do not know where the children can arrive to, but it is a fabulous experience. . . .

In the last two years we have assisted the kids who set problems within the group; they ask other children or adults about complex problems. The *whys* they ask are very important and lead to the discovery of being able to solve problems. Kids are always in contact with the work they do; they always ask, "Why?" They inform themselves; they find that what they say and what they do are considered by the adult; they find adults who collaborate with them, for example, their family. Parents are interested in the work children do and come to us with questions.

Last year we had very young children; they had just entered the preschool. We have always observed them, and we noticed that they were inclined to form groups. The children picked out those kids with whom they have lasting relationships. Our work as adults is based also on the observation of these groups, because their staying together in groups permits them to discover one another. Perhaps if they didn't form groups, it would take them longer to understand the others.

[Can you give an example of fostering collaboration?]

Last year, each of the two teachers had to carry on a project which would be brought to an end. We had to be present and absent. We had to catch the right moments to intervene. Kids greatly appreciated the fact of hearing, saying, intervening; and this makes their interest grow within the group, especially in young kids. I had to gather together all the points touched on and remember them. "Where shall we arrive?" I used to ask myself. Children discovered the adult and used her. They used her and her means. "Tell us what we said!" They give, but they want you to give as well. They want to receive.

I then refused to be their memory and proposed a visible form of memory, so we (or better, they) had to translate their ideas into a language comprehensible to them all. The possibilities were many: graphics, simulations, etc.

Since that time, we have always been asking them to do that at once, to give them the opportunity to explain themselves in a better way. And this requires making oneself understood by the others, which is a strong motivation. Other kids often intervene. This is useful as they help the other child to explain himself and to make clear his ideas. For example, when studying colored shadows, kids had transparent, colored books. These books made a colored shadow—not a black shadow, as people and animals do. They had to explain this: "Why don't the books make a black shadow?" The experience was really very good.

The younger member of LR's co-teaching team, MC, was interviewed later. Rather than make abstract statements about the place of collaborative learning in the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, she simply sought to describe what the process of collaborative learning looks like, using the example of a videotaped session involving herself and two boys. She described how the children confronted their shared problem, formed a bond, generated a "fan" of ideas, sought each other's opinions and suggestions, and persevered until (rather surprisingly) they achieved the

solution of a very difficult problem. She added that this kind of collaborative problem solving is less likely to appear when children are in their entire class of twenty-five.

MC: Certainly the possibilities that a child encounters inside a school are varied and diversified; cooperation understood as a 'system of relations'—not only on the personal level, but in learning to be together with others, facing things together—is an important part because it can increase the qualitative level of one's ideas as compared to others, such as we've observed in the video [in which I work with two boys who are seeking to draw a picture with a computer-activated Logo turtle]. Those two children faced a problem, in which it clearly showed them the meaning of solving together, of how one plus its counterpart confronted the problem and proved how this bond clearly was established, this "fan" of ideas and support—to help one—think and build on ideas, with the support of others. It was actually something of a surprise the way they solved the problem. There is an element of surprise every time one sees and observes such a bond being formed among the children. Their independent decision, "swing of ideas" (exchange), hesitation, and gradual formation of a unified decision, finally turns toward the "house." One is truly amazed, for one could not have suspected such an outcome at the beginning of the episode.

This type of observation we can make not only as in this instance with the two children, but also in all instances of learning, cooperation, and in all contexts. A group of twenty-five children as a unified body may or may not show us this elaborate process of cooperation with one another, such as we may see in smaller groups, such as a group of four children, six, or eight, where the number determines what can be accomplished in respect to cooperation. As in our previous example, with the two children on video, these were children who knew one another and experienced together this new situation in which one could see the diverging thoughts and varied processes, but also the seeking of each other's opinions and suggestions. Though diverging at first, they did not drop their common project but instead arrived at a final decision together.

Finally, in a joint interview with a co-teaching pair, MB and MM, the initial statement addressed issues also frequently raised by the others in later parts of their interviews or in the group discussions, namely, what factors—age, sex, prior experience, group size and composition—influ-

ence young children's capacities to collaborate in problem solving. MB and MM noted that for the youngest children (three-years-old), prior friendships formed in the nido (infant-toddler center) are the starting point for collaboration in the preprimary school. Moreover, the collaborative process in three-year-olds looks different, more simple—based on comparison, exchange, and proximity—than among older children. Finally, they referred to two issues then a focus of attention among the Reggio system as a whole: what size of group (two, three, four, five, or more children) works best in project work?; and how do sex differences affect social process and style of problem solving?

MB and MM: In our class there are twenty-five children, three-year-olds, and twenty-three of those twenty-five are coming from the nido. In fact, ten are coming from one nido. We start with fact that because it is a very important element in cooperation. Of course, three-year-olds are very different from four- and five-year-olds, but even at the nido level, especially the last year, they start making friends. So some of the children who come in [to the preprimary school] at three already have their favorite friends. They arrive in groups that are already quite settled. In fact, for them it is almost more important to be together than to have the same teacher. So this part is very important.

Indeed, the collaborative process is very much in operation at this age. It's very important. It's very—what one does, generally, is close to another child. So although there is not always an exchange, just to be near another person is a very important element.

One should never separate the cognitive and social aspects, speaking of a child, because a child is a whole and when the child learns, he learns as a whole. And it's very important to have a friend nearby when one learns so one can compare, just compare what one learns in a very approximate way. The best relationship at this age is between two children—a couple—that forms spontaneously. One child looks for one other child, not for two or three other children. And at three, the couples can be of the same sex or of different sex. They don't seem to be so aware, or to have problems in playing with children of the opposite sex at this age. But when children become four or five this [sex difference] makes a big difference. And also one thing that is important to keep in mind is that although the children are three years old, actually there is a big range because of the birthdays, some could have the birthday in December or January, so it's quite a wide age range.

In sum, in their opening remarks, the Reggio Emilia educators introduced key aspects of how they view collaboration. Not only what they said was significant, but equally what they did not say. They stressed their identification with the collective nature of their work, and did not differentiate their individual thoughts from those of the larger reference group. Conflict was mentioned as a part of productive communication, rather than as a negative to be avoided, and they did not state any limits to the amount of group work children should do. They noted the importance of small group size in allowing fruitful exchange and dialogue, and did not describe the group as coercive over the individual. They defined the teacher's role in facilitating communication, and did not state any general ways teachers tend to, or should try to, restrain the development of collaborations or cliques between children. Finally, they spoke of the need to observe spontaneous social processes—the natural formation of friendships, the approach-avoidance relations of boys and girls—as a part of understanding children's social possibilities, and they did not volunteer these factors, or developmental or personality factors, as intractable obstacles to any child's participation in collaborative project work. The Amherst teachers, as we shall see, were much more conservative about what they saw as dangers or limitations to collaboration in young children.

The Collaboration Interview: Opening Statements of the Amherst Educators

The teachers in the Common School worked in teaching teams, with each classroom having a head teacher supervising one or two assistant teachers. All of the classrooms are mixed-age, containing the equivalent of two age-grades. This organization is intended to give each child alternating experiences of being one of the older and one of the younger members in the classroom group; to increase the amount of inter-child helping; to reduce competition and invidious comparisons of children's abilities; and to support teachers in giving children one-to-one attention.

One of these head teachers, GS, who worked in one of the three- and four-year-old classrooms, began by affirming that collaboration, in the "social sense," is critical to the mission of early education. In her view, the shared setting of preschool requires that children negotiate how to "get along with each other." Children contribute individual input into this process through problem-solving discussions. However, GS stressed that she and her teaching team do not generally plan for shared projects within the curriculum. Individual ownership of products remains of primary value for both children and teachers. In part, these individual

products stand as a representation of each child's activity and even his or her identity.

GS: Well there would be no need to have children to come to school if it weren't that they need to cooper. . . ah. . . collaborate with each other. You know the whole purpose of a nursery school is that the children have interactions with other children and therefore have to learn how to get along with other people. In the social sense we totally collaborate all the time. You know, "Who can do what?" and "Who can be where?" and "What is alright to play with who?" and how to be with other people. I mean, everything the whole time has to do with working with other people.

When it comes to actual set-up by teachers, organized work, we do relatively little that is a project that all of them work on at the same time. We might put a project together after each one individually worked on their part. We might then put it together, either as a display together, or we stick it together and make something out of it or, you know, use it in that way, but, when. . . in the whole art area most of the time each child works on their own project and takes it home . . . eventually.

There is quite a lot of emphasis on bringing a project home: to some extent because you are part of your project, but another extent to communicate with the parents what the children are doing at school. My reason for putting stuff in a bag in the drawer [for parents to pick up and take home], even though the kid might have lost interest at that point, is that it's an easy way to tell the parent that he's been painting today. . . you know, so it's nice to let them see it even if they just toss it out. On the other hand, the kids often get attached to what they do and often want to take stuff home. So, there is a lot of emphasis on your own thing, what you make.

But when it comes to getting along with other people and working together and. . . so we do a lot of problem solving together. We will have, for instance, on Friday we had a discussion on "What can we do so we don't make the playhouse so messy that we're not able to clean it up anymore?" and then we let the children speak on that subject matter and we try to use their suggestions, if there are any we can agree on. So we talked about it and what we came to on Friday was that we will only have four children there for a little while and see if that makes it better. It's not a finished discussion of the problem, there will be discussion of this for the next six weeks [laughs]. . . that happened last year too . . . !

The opening statement of MS, head teacher of the other three- and four-year-old classroom, also immediately raised the inevitability of collaboration arising within a shared setting. That MS sees this collaboration as involving the "incorporation of each other's ideas," hints at the Amherst school's attention to perspective taking as a vehicle for both intellectual and social development. While acknowledging her focus on the "individual" (note that she uses the word, "individual," seven times in her first three sentences), MS argued that encouraging children's autonomous action actually makes collaboration possible; that is, through shared knowledge of each peer's contribution of individuality to the "unique group." Finally, MS asserts the much repeated view of the Amherst educators, that collaboration best occurs "naturally" within child-initiated activity" rather than in projects directed by teachers.

MS: I see it [learning] as a collaborative process in the sense that there are twenty individuals in the classroom sharing in activities and social interchange with each other, and within that setting we're bound to collaborate and share with and incorporate each other's ideas. I think we tend to focus more on individual projects and individual strengths of the kids and encourage their self-initiative and confidence in themselves. And in the process, I think that draws our attention to those individual traits—attention to each child as an individual—but in that sense we make up a unique group, with each individual within the group. The kids collaborating together comes out of their knowledge and understanding of each other as individuals.

[Can you give examples?]

There are lots of little groups that gather. For instance, today there was a group playing with Playmobile, with pirates and boats, and collaborating on a shared fantasy theme. We have a marker [pens] area that's pretty much independent where teachers and kids go off and draw together. I've heard kids discussing, "Oh, you make a really nice house. Houses are hard for me, but I can do this well." Kids showing, "Well, I do a house this way," and sort of sharing their different strategies for drawing. At the water tables with different kinds of pumps, I've seen one kid pumping water and another kid putting a trough underneath and cooperating to catch the water and direct the water in different directions. It tends in our classroom to be child-initiated types of collaboration more than teacher-facilitated, although we do make a conscious effort to set up situations where that can happen naturally—kids collaborating on projects. If we're setting up a corn starch goop activity with different colors and bowls, we'd do it at a

round table where kids would have the opportunity to pass and share the colors and mix them, saying, "Can I have some of your green and I'll put in some of my yellow."

Similar to her colleagues, BJ, the head teacher in the five- and six-year-old classroom, held that collaboration is grounded in children having opportunities to contribute their ideas to the group's curriculum. Children take ownership of the curriculum through having this "voice in it." BJ believes that this sense of participation presents the best potential for collaborative effort between children. As a teacher she aims to act as a facilitator. From BJ's perspective, the autonomy she encourages offers the children considerable freedom to truly negotiate ideas with peers. This process involves the (worthwhile) risk of giving over some teacher control of the curriculum. Here is her opening statement:

BJ: I like to give space to the children to interact with the curriculum. . . to get their ideas into what we are learning and in that sense I see it as a collaborative effort. Whatever we are studying, the children should have a voice in it in a way that they can feel that they can express their own ideas and influence the way that curriculum goes. It becomes a very variable thing, uneven—some days and some times you feel the need to take charge of what's going on and give it direction, and other times there are many opportunities where you can just go with the flow, with what the children are suggesting to you.

[Can you give examples?]

I guess, as an example: one of the things I love to do is plays, and we did a play this fall that involved insects, because we were studying them and the children made up the play and decided what part they would play in it. The children are not at the point where they work wonderfully well at accepting each other's ideas, but they were able to sustain what came out of the group as a whole, and I helped them put it together. But it was their ideas, and they bought into it, and they worked together and did a slightly crazy. . . but it was their ideas and it was childlike in its conception and fun and successful. My own experience has been that feeding kids lines in a play is never half as successful, particularly with young children, as saying, "Who would you like to be in this play?" And people know what they want to be and what they can be doing and [in that way] build the play from the ground up.

The final opening statement comes from RA, presently the head teacher of the six- to eight-year-old classroom but for many years the head teacher of three- and four-year-olds. She distinguished between projects that foster collaboration and those that do not. Yet, even when children are focused on "personal goals," RA still identifies collaboration as happening in the "give and take" of individual perspectives that occurs in a group setting. This process is reminiscent of the "incorporation of ideas" noted by MS earlier. As teacher, RA supports this exchange through modeling. With these older children, though, RA also plans curricula that will necessitate children coming together collaboratively in pursuit of "common goals," such as when making a large group sculpture. She also describes clearly the way in which the organizational feature of a mixed-age group plays a key role in promoting inter-child nurturance and cooperation. Even when talking about these activities, however, RA still emphasizes the individual when she discusses the process of peer "consultation" in collaborative projects and the way mixed-age grouping allows teachers to provide children with "individual attention."

RA: I think it depends on what they are doing. There are certain things we plan with collaboration in mind. For instance, this past semester we studied the culture of Indians, and there were certain things the children worked on on their own and were their [individual] projects. However, even in those situations they worked at tables in groups, and there's a lot of give and take. There's a lot going back and forth, and the teachers will model a lot of this. Because very often a teacher will be doing a similar sort of project and might lean over and say [to a child], "Oh, how did you get that to do that over there?" and modeling that kind of questioning and answering. so the children will do it with each other. But, the end result is something they own themselves and take away with them, and that tends to be something that happens a lot.

And so what we try to do is think of things that necessitate them all working toward a common goal as opposed to working toward a personal goal. One of the parents came in who works a lot with clay and they built a huge clay horse modeled on Indian terra-cotta sculpture. And they all knew that [it] was something that no one was going to take away with them, and they all had to work on it together. And there was a lot more consultation, "Oh, what do you think would look good here? How should we make the legs?" So there was a lot more collaboration that went on with something like that. So I think that learning can be [collaborative], depending on the task.

[Is this a mixed-age group you are working with?]

Yes, there are six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds. So that also changes the dynamics, because the older children know the ropes and are very often called upon to help the new fledglings coming in and show them what to do and how to do it. I think the older children tend to be more collaborative. They seem to feel like they know what is going on, and it's their role—it's built into the operation of the classroom—that in order to provide the individual attention that we like to give children, they need to assume a role in which they are helping [younger children].

Together, the Common School teachers introduced key aspects of how they view collaboration. Their use of "we," speaking of the teachers' perspective, was reminiscent of the Reggio educators and reflected the strong sense of collegial partnership within each of the teaching teams and within the school as a whole. In defining collaboration, they talked about the impact of the shared ecology of the classroom and the mixed-age grouping that promote spontaneous collaboration through play, mutual helping, and exchange of ideas. They made a distinction that we never heard in Reggio Emilia: between this kind of child-initiated collaboration, rooted in spontaneous social interaction, and a kind that is teacher-initiated, taking place in the context of group problem-solving discussions or teacher-initiated projects like doing a play or building a large sculpture. Teachers preferred the spontaneous, child-initiated collaborations and the group problem-solving discussions as the most valuable and appropriate experiences for young, preprimary children.

It is interesting that, in spite of coming squarely out of the politically and pedagogically leftist Progressive Education tradition, these teachers followed the common American habit of using many words and phrases that originated from the domain of property relations and transactions: BJ says that children "bought into" the play idea; RA talks about children doing work they "own themselves" and offering ideas in "consultation." They talked on several occasions about "investment" and "input" into the curriculum "owned" by all. This can be seen as complementary to their Deweyian vision of the school as a democratic community in which each individual has an equal voice and active participation. In general, their emphasis is on children's individual self-development and how this can be enhanced through friendship, mutual helping, play, perspective taking, group problem solving, and as children grow older, genuine collaborative project work. These issues (and others) emerged repeatedly in subsequent interviews in the data gathering: in the dialogues held with each teaching team and in the two large meetings for cross-cultural video-reflection.

Conclusion

Beginning with shared assumptions about the nature of the child and of schooling as a "system of relations and communications embedded in the wider social system" (Rinaldi, 1990), the educators in Reggio Emilia have developed over the past thirty years a distinctive approach to early education. The concrete features of this approach include, as key components, small group collaborative learning; continuity over time of child-child and child-teacher relations; a focus on problem solving and long-term projects involving mastery of many symbolic media; fostering of the connections between home, school, and the wider community; and awareness and appreciation of cultural heritage (city, region, and nation). Accompanying these concrete organizational features is a shared discourse or language of education that allows the Reggio teachers to collaborate, that is, in their own terms, to exchange ideas, listen to one another, and engage in meaningful conflict over ideas. Their language of education is readily apparent in their statements in the collaboration interviews, as well as the subsequent group video-reflection discussions. It is based on a theory of knowledge that defines thinking and learning as social and communicative events—co-constructive experiences for both children and adults.

The Amherst educators, members of a school community founded in the 1960s and based on Deweyian principles of progressive education, likewise have developed a shared language of education. Central to their goals are promoting the development of each unique individual, within a strong community stretching backward and forward in time and containing children, their families, and all the staff at the school—director, librarian, teachers, assistant teachers, and others. This community is conceived as democratic, diverse, and drawing strength from the ties of cross-age relationships. Their language of education, very different from that heard in Reggio Emilia, is based on a theory of knowledge that sees thinking and learning as a matter of each child gaining knowledge of self, others, and the wider world through social interaction, research, and discussion—processes that stimulate the development of mature autonomy and self-realization. Placing the two perspectives in juxtaposition, it is easy to see how each language of education constrains or directs the thinking of its teachers, but at the same time packages ideas economically to make communication and dialogue possible for the community. The language of education preferred in Amherst focuses teachers' attention on individuals and how they develop and change over time. The preferred discourse makes it difficult for them to regard groups as the always desirable context for intellectual work and

supports the view that teachers should closely monitor social interactions between children and be available to work closely in short, one-on-one or one-on-two spurts, with children engaged in intellectual work, so that children have opportunities for both guided and independent learning. In contrast, the language of education preferred in Reggio Emilia focuses teachers' attention on children always in relation to the group, and makes it difficult for them to speak systematically about the value of their program in terms of what the children gain from it, year by year, across specific domains.

At the same time, the educators in each community seem to be aware of more dimensions and more complexity than what their language of education structures for them. As we shall discuss in future writings, both groups of teachers are highly aware of the unique personality of each child and also highly knowledgeable about the group processes in their classroom. Indeed, it appeared that the interviews and discussions involved in our research, particularly the cross-cultural video-reflection, provoked the teachers to consider the limitations of both their own and the other community's discourse and practices.

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