

The Incorporation of Principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach in a North American Pre-school Music Curriculum: An Action Research

By

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Abstract

This study examined the experiences of children in two pre-school classes in a music curriculum that incorporated principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. Video recordings, transcriptions of child compositions, and field notes were analyzed through the lens of the Reggio principles. Findings demonstrated that light and shadow play enabled the children to make discoveries, empowered them to create their own learning experiences, and gave them agency over their learning and the learning of their classmates. Group composition provided a musical equivalent to the creation of murals in the visual arts domain of Reggio Emilia and enabled children to communicate musically in an expressive way. Reflective video documentation gave rise to the children as co-researchers. Age-based implications for the implementation of the Reggio approach were found to exist for music instruction.

The municipal schools in the town of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy serve as a model for progressive early childhood centers throughout the world. Hailed as the most avant-garde pre-schools in the world (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1991), the Reggio Emilia approach centers on the “hundred languages of children,” acknowledging that all children possess multiple intelligences and multiple modes of communication and expression. The grounding vision “is based on the image of a child who has great potential for development and is the subject of rights, a child who learns and grows in relation with others, through the hundred languages of doing, being, reflecting, and knowing.” (North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA), 2008)

The child is the protagonist in the Reggio Emilia approach. Learning is child-centered and the teacher plays the role of partner or co-researcher. The focus of the approach is on the child’s competencies rather than the child’s deficiencies. Thorough and creative documentation serves as a central means of communication between the child, the teacher, and the community. In Reggio schools, the environment acts as a third teacher, meaning that the space that children, teachers, and parents create for the child’s learning has significant impact on her work. Many pre-schools in North America adopt the Reggio approach as is shown through the large membership of schools in the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) (NAREA, 2008). Music is a vibrant feature of the schools in Reggio Emilia. However, based on publications on Reggio Emilia and my study visit to the Reggio schools, the element of music education most present in the approach is

discovery¹; there is little to no focus on musical skill building or performance. None of the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia employ a music teacher, though several *atelieristas* are employed in each school. The role of the Reggio atelierista is to prepare materials for visual arts projects, to collaborate with teachers, to work with children on their visual art projects, and to display the products and processes of the children's work for the children, teachers, and the community to enjoy.

Upon visiting the Reggio Schools, I queried, "If discovery is the only element of music given priority in the Reggio Schools, how will the children develop the skills of producing pitch and rhythm to use as tools to further discover, make, and compose music in the future?"

Research Questions

With this overarching question in mind, I set out to examine the role of music in a North American pre-school that has adopted the Reggio Emilia approach and the ways in which a traditional pre-school music curriculum might be modified to incorporate elements of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Given the varying degrees to which the Reggio Emilia philosophy is incorporated in North American Schools and the broad spectrum through which the philosophy is interpreted, a qualitative research design was appropriate for this investigation.

Two questions framed this study. They were:

1. In what ways can key principles of the Reggio Emilia philosophy be incorporated into an American pre-school music curriculum?

¹ The researcher defines music discovery as the experience of music from the natural impulse of the child without the imposition of formal structure, musical skills, or group singing.

2. In what ways is the musical learning of a pre-school child affected when a music curriculum is altered to incorporate elements of the Reggio Emilia philosophy?

Grounding Literature

The present study was informed by the findings of advocates for early childhood music education. In an early study on the young child's vocal ability, Smith (1963) found that vocal training is appropriate for 3- and 4-year-olds and results in a significant increase in singing ability. Sergeant and Roche (1973) found that attention to absolute pitch was greatest among 3- and 4-year olds, and was diminished among 5- and 6-year-olds. Thus, the critical period for development of absolute pitch may have already passed by the time children reach elementary school. Cohen and Baird (1990) built upon this research by making an analogy between the early acquisition of categories for speech sounds and pitch. Rutkowski (1996) discovered that individual and small-group singing instruction during the entire Kindergarten year improved children's singing ability and developmental music aptitude. Levinowitz, Barnes, Guerrini, Clement, D'April and Morey (1998) found that the number of New Jersey elementary students who can sing in tune has dropped 33% over the last twenty years leading her to conclude that children's musical interests should be supported in the early years in order to flourish (Hoffman, 2008).

Additionally, the present study is grounded in Pond's (1980) studies on the spontaneous music making of children during the 1930s and 1940s. Through extensive observation of young children in a naturalistic context, Pond determined that young children's musical experiences are primarily based on the discovery of sound, and that

social, environmental, and procedural conditions for children's music making should be carefully planned and observed. Further, Burton (2002) demonstrated that the spontaneous songs of young children are reflections of their capacity to organize musical ideas in relationship to their surrounding environments.

Based on the work of Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (1998), Malaguzzi (1998), and the NAREA (2008), the following principles of the Reggio Emilia approach have further focused this study:

1. The child as the creator of his/her own learning.
2. The child and adult as researchers.
3. The environment as the third teacher.
4. Documentation as communication.
5. The one hundred expressive languages of children.
6. The dialogue between child and adult.
7. Collaborative work.

American music educators Andress (1998), Matthews (2000), Crisp (2007), and Crisp & Caldwell (2008) have examined opportunities for connections between music education and the Reggio approach. Andress (1998) looked to project-based music lessons as a model for this partnership and created a web of exploration based on the initiatives of the children in her class. Matthews (2000) discussed some of the challenges of approaching music education in a Reggio-influenced school environment. She considered how children "acquire" music and asked how "the student could *be* musical rather than become musical." (Matthews, 2000, p. 21) Matthews created opportunities for children to *mess around* with instruments on their own initiative, and she dealt with the puzzle of

documenting music learning through audio recording and transcribing the children's music. Crisp (2007) combined Orff Schulwerk with the Reggio Emilia approach and contributed lesson plans as a starting point for music educators who sought to weave the two together. Crisp's lessons, *Exploring Barred Instruments with the Young Child: Lessons 1 and 2* (Crisp & Caldwell, 2008), were used in this study and will be discussed subsequently.

Methodology

Participants

Between January 21 and March 11, 2009, the children of two pre-school music classes at a private school in Manhattan, New York, participated in a study that integrated elements of the Reggio Emilia early childhood approach with a traditional pre-school music curriculum. With Human Subjects approval from the host school, 2 South (a class of 4-and-a-half and 5-year-olds) and 3 North (a class of 3-and-a-half and 4-year-olds) participated in the study. 2 South came to music class in half groups of 11 children, each half attending one 30-minute class each week. 3 North met in a full group of 15 children, which attended music class twice per week for 30 minutes. During the study, there were two music class periods in which the 3 North children came in half groups for 15 minutes each.

In this study, I, the researcher, served as the music instructor and sole collector of data. I am the only music teacher at the school and I teach 21 thirty-minute pre-school music and movement classes per week. I am responsible for the design of the music and movement curriculum and lesson plans at the school, thus the curriculum could be modified as needed for the two participating classes in order to serve the study. I also

direct a graded church choir program in the same building, in which several of the children in the study classes participate. The church choirs, however, did not participate in the study.

Design and Procedure

Two curricula incorporating principles of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education were designed for each study class². I chose to create two different curricula in anticipation of developmental variances between the class of threes and the class of fours and fives, as well as to compliment the curricular themes in the two different classrooms. The following data were collected to account for multiple perspectives: 14 digital video recordings of complete music class meetings, verbatim transcriptions of those video recordings, transcriptions of three songs spontaneously composed by children, journal notes, field notes, interviews with children and one teacher, 20 photographs, and two edited videos. I analyzed the data during and after their collection. The act of carefully transcribing video footage of children, as well as interviewing the children and one teacher, provided a triangulated perspective of the data (Merriam, 1998), centering on the learning that the participants experienced (Creswell, 2009).

Credibility

In this study, I used *differing perspectives*, defined by Creswell (2003) as the presentation of material that is contrary to themes presented. I considered the perspectives of Pond (1980) on the spontaneous music making of young children, and Becker (1986)

² For more information on the study, including details of the curriculum, contact the author at asmith@brickchurch.org.

and Oehrle (1991) on multicultural views of music making in an attempt to control for my own bias toward traditional Western music education. Additionally, I used *interpretive validity*, defined by Johnson (1997) as the ability of the researcher to understand and represent the attitudes and feelings of the participants in regard to the subject of the research. To achieve this, I transcribed 14 video-recorded lessons and interpreted the data in ways that revealed the scope and breadth of the research participants' experience.

Creswell (2009) points out that a researcher's *prolonged time* in a field gives validity to the study by the fact that the researcher has long-ranging perspective on the study subjects. Because I, the researcher, worked with the children for as many as 2.5 years prior to the study and two months after the study, prolonged time in the field serves as a means of validity in this study.

Trustworthiness

Rich, thick description (Merriam, 1998) is a form of validity used in this study. Fourteen classes were video recorded and transcribed, verbatim. An *external auditor*, defined by Creswell (2009), is a person "not familiar with the researcher or the project and [who] can provide an objective assessment of the project throughout the process of research or at the conclusion of the study." (p. 192) A colleague from the University of Chicago, who has a background in music performance and social work, reviewed the data and verified that the codes were identified and interpreted in an appropriate way, relevant to the data collected. Additionally, the head teacher of the 3 North class performed a *member check* during the study, which Merriam (1998) defines as taking the data and study information back to participants to confirm that the data are accurate and the

interpretations are plausible. She verified that the data and its interpretation are congruent with her observations during the study.

Here, I will present an overview of the implementation of the Reggio-influenced curricula in two vignettes.

Vignette One: 2 South

The older of the two participant classes was 2 South. This group of children was engaged and excited by the project work and the collaboration embedded in the study curriculum. Their project stemmed from a pair of lessons created by Crisp (2008) in which flashlights visually guide children through the space of the room. Later, the children transfer the movement that they use following the flashlight to finger movement on barred Orff instruments and, utilizing Magorian's (1999) poem Night Lights, a performance that combines the spoken word, the light of the flashlights, and Orff instruments culminates. The 2 South music lessons began with Crisp's lesson. Using the flashlights and Orff instruments, the class created a vocabulary of play correlating to the light's action. Children took turns using the flashlight to guide their peers as they played the instruments, acting as conductors. At this point, the project strayed from Crisp's lessons; I chose to use a different poem than Crisp suggested – one from the Siegen-Smith (1999) collection, entitled Fireflies, which was written by Weil (1999).

The topic of fireflies in the poem sparked creative movement and composition in the 2 South study class. I hung a scrim, made from a semi-sheer curtain secured to a curtain rod, in front of a small stage. Behind it, I placed a flood lamp, creating what the Reggio educators call a *provocation* for the children - the presentation of carefully

selected materials and the invitation for the children to determine their use. The children explored the scrim and determined many creative ways to use it. When I asked how we could use the scrim, Benjamin said, “Lightning bugs? Pretend the flashlight’s the back of the lightning bug.” Amanda said, “We could turn off the lights and then somebody could go behind there and point it behind the cloth where the lightning bugs are flying.” Greg got excited saying, “Let’s do that!”

In later classes, I invited the children to create a melody to accompany the Fireflies poem. With prompting, two children sang their ideas to me for the first and last phrases of the poem. I video recorded this session so that I could play back their ideas, both on that day for the children to hear, and later on my own in order to transcribe their compositions. To draw out the children who weren’t putting forth ideas for a melody, I invited each child to sit behind a barred instrument and choose notes to accompany the middle phrase, “...you could read secrets under your blanket...” One child carefully played the ten syllables of the middle phrase between two different bars, and this became our second phrase. The class sang their composed song together. Before the next class, I transcribed the song on staff paper so that the children could see that they had created a real composition. I reminded them of the melody and together we practiced the song.

To bring the project to fruition, I encouraged the class to create a performance that included the singing of our song, the playing of Orff instruments, and a “play” behind the scrim. Each child took on a specific role: singer, conductor, instrumentalist, actor-playing-a-firefly, or actor-playing-a-firefly-catcher. Together, we determined a sequence for the performance and practiced it. In the final class, the children performed the piece as rehearsed for the video camera instead of a live audience. The video performance was

posted on the school's website for the children and parents to view, serving as a source of documentation.

Vignette Two: 3 North

The 3 North class was comprised of 14 very eager 3- and 4-year-olds. Their study turned out to be less of a continuous project than the 2 South study because the children were not initiating project work the way that the older children in 2 South were. Instead, I tried various approaches to weaving Reggio-inspired elements - such as composition, light exploration, and documentation - into what had been a more typical early childhood music context. The study began with an exploration of shadows. I shined a light projector against a blank wall with the lights in the room turned off and invited the children to “find their shadows.” After time for shadow discovery, I guided the children in exploratory movement: They made shadows to resemble birds, and connected the experience by casting bird shadows on the wall while actively listening to a recording of Saint-Saëns *Carnival of the Animals*.

Following this activity, I invited the children in the class to create songs about birds. Several children composed songs spontaneously and I recorded them on digital video. Throughout the study, I sought opportunities to follow the children's interests and to see if their ideas would take us in the direction of Reggio-like project learning, but found that collaboration was difficult for children so young. Instead, I focused on documenting music lessons as a means of combining the Reggio principle of documentation with early childhood music education. Documentation in the Reggio

approach is a visually-based depiction of the process of learning. It proves to be problematic in the case of music, which is abstract, multi-sensory, and intangible. To address the need for sound and motion in documentation, I video recorded most lessons and transcribed three songs that were composed by individual children. Experimenting with a process that came about in a discussion with Dr. Suzanne Burton on February 18, 2009, I used iMovie to edit one of the lessons into a 14-minute film, then invited the children to watch. The children enjoyed watching themselves and their friends on film. As they watched, I recorded all of their comments. Among many comments from the children, Rajiv said, "That's me!" Wendy asked, "Where's me?" Ellie said, "You'll just have to wait and see, right, Mrs. Smith?" While watching footage of the children making shadows, Oliver noticed, "Brent just bumped Ellie's shadow."

After transcribing their comments about the film, I edited them into the video as subtitles at the moments in which they were spoken. I also posted a description of one of the study's *Carnival of the Animals* lessons on the school's website, along with pictures of the lesson. The edited video is presented on the school website along with the performance video of the 2 South class' culminating experience. This new form of documentation captured the process of the children's learning - their experience and comments - and shared their competencies with the community, aligning well with the principles of Reggio Emilia.

Themes

Through this research study I sought to explore the ways in which key principles of the Reggio Emilia philosophy could be incorporated into an American pre-school curriculum, and to examine the ways in which the musical learning of pre-school children

were affected by the incorporation of this philosophy into a music curriculum. Whereas findings from an action research are not generalizable, in this case, findings from this study may have features of transferability.

Developmental Differences Between Age Groups

Because of significant differences in the development of children aged three to five years, I found that the degree to which the Reggio philosophy might be incorporated into a music classroom could vary widely. Many of the Reggio principles, including *the child as the creator of his own learning*, *the child and adult as researchers*, *the dialogue between child and adult*, and *collaborative work*, imply a significant degree of collaboration and self-regulation on the part of the child. Therefore, I experienced more success developing emergent curriculum and project work with the older of the two study classes. Project work proved to be a challenge in this study with the 3 North group of 3-year-olds in their first year of formal schooling. While Helm and Katz (2001) found that children as young as three are capable of engaging in meaningful project work, Katz and Chard (1994) assert that the social and emotional development involved in many aspects of project work may not progress at a rapid rate in children until the age of four or older. I found that foundational music experiences and discovery-based learning were more appropriate for the 3-year-old age group. The group of 5-year-olds in the 2 South class, however, did have success in a curriculum that called for collaboration with the teacher and with other children. They were able to listen and dialogue, and were responsive to the needs of the group. For the younger children in 3 North, building a foundation for discussion,

exploration, collaboration, respect, and research may enable them to more successfully participate in Reggio-influenced experiences when they are four and five years old.

Environment as the Third Teacher

The incorporation of shadow play and light play honor the Reggio principle that the *environment serves as the third teacher*. The aesthetic draw of shadow and light play helped me to create an environment that was engaging, inspiring children's creativity. These forms of play provided the children with opportunities to discover, research, and construct their own understandings about movement, space, and light thus enabling them to act as agents of their own learning. This finding is supported by Bruner (1991), who observed that learning does not occur in isolation, but within social and environmental contexts. Shadow play and light play, by their nature, occur in a social context that additionally aids in the child's learning experience. Vygotsky (1986) observed that children's learning is enhanced by collaboration with skilled peers. Collective creative movement in the context of shadow play served as another mode of expression honoring the *hundred languages of children* in the Reggio Emilia approach.

Composition

For the children of 2 South and 3 North, composition served as one of the *hundred languages of children* by acting as a mode of expression that was different than speech, movement, or visual communication. Musical composition in the music classroom provided an opportunity for the children to take ownership of their musical learning. In the present study, the fact that the children's spontaneous song creations possessed meter, mode, and text showed that they had internalized Western musical form. This is supported by Burton (2002) who found that young children's spontaneous songs are informed by

their environments. By being given the opportunity to create their own music, the children were enabled to be the creators of their own learning. Additionally, composition in this context allowed me, the teacher, to act as a researcher. By analyzing the children's compositions, I could assess their musical understanding and learn more about the children's musical development.

Compositional expression was also achieved in the study through creative movement in dance and shadow play, in which the children were the creators of their own learning. Additionally, group composition united the children of the 2 South class, demonstrating the collective expressive competencies of a class. In this way, group composition could be considered the musical equivalent of the visual art mural -- a commonly used form of group work in the Reggio culture.

Video Documentation

Video documentation of music classes served Reggio principles by making the competencies of the children known to the community, and providing the opportunity for the children and the teacher to be researchers. Because the visual arts are prominent in Reggio schools, visual documentation is also prominent. Due to the intangible nature of music and movement, visual documentation is not sufficient for the recording and sharing of musical experiences. In this digital age, video documentation is not only possible, it is accessible, and many avenues for sharing video documentation are now available. Using video documentation in this study, I was able to examine the spontaneous songs of the children and transcribe them, learning through this process about the child's musical understanding. Audio documentation could also be used for this purpose, however, video documentation allowed for the addition of sight, enabling me to know which child was

singing, and to observe and study non-verbal expressions of the child composer and those children who were listening. Video documentation allowed the children to act as researchers as they watched themselves and made comments about their understanding of their participation. Showing footage of the children *to* the children themselves and allowing them time to reflect upon it provided an additional layer of documentation to the children regarding their own work. Vygotsky (1986) demonstrates the value of providing a scaffold within the zone of proximal development in which the child may construct understanding. In the present study, the video of the children in their music class provided a structure through which the children could understand their learning and build upon it. The 2 South class created a multi-faceted performance around the topic of Weil's poem, *Fireflies*, in which the children played instruments, sang an original composition, and created a shadow play behind a scrim. Rather than share this performance with a live audience, which may have added a high degree of pressure to the experience, disrupting the emergent process, and which would have been a challenge because of space issues with the instruments and the scrim, the performance was video recorded. These videos, which could be viewed on the school website, enabled parents to see the process of children's musical learning, as well as to appreciate the children's creative competencies through performance.

Discussion and Implications

Documentation

Video and internet documentation served as an effective way to display the process of music learning and make the children's competencies known. For young children ages three and four, video or audio recording of spontaneous singing proved to be a successful

way to incorporate composition into the class. In a typical pre-school music context, these songs may be transcribed and later sung to the children to validate their work and to lead to further learning. Children ages five and older were able to begin group composition with my facilitation. These children were capable of considering the contributions of others and were able to build upon each other's creative ideas. As a facilitator, the music teacher in a typical pre-school music class could begin with a simple text, such as a short poem, and ask the children to offer ideas of how the text could be sung. The teacher could record or quickly notate the children's musical phrases and make decisions about which fragments would work together.

The Music Atelierista

The implementation of a music curriculum that incorporates elements of the Reggio Emilia approach could require a time commitment far greater than that required for a traditional pre-school music program. Some pre-school music teachers lead as many as ten different classes of children per week. Creating the opportunity for an emergent curriculum implies a significant amount of preparation and follow-up for the music teacher. By nature, each class' emergent curriculum will be different based on where the children decide to take their project. For each class, the music teacher would need to discuss project opportunities with each head teacher prior to the start of the curriculum, and the music teacher would need to follow up with those head teachers as determined by the nature of the project. Depending on the direction of the project, the music teacher may also need to do significant preparatory work and research to find and provide the necessary materials to implement the project.

A great deal of time is involved in organizing the process of video recording, observing the videos of students, organizing the video material, transcribing compositions, and editing clips for documentation purposes. The process of documentation alone could easily double a music teacher's preparatory time. Though extremely worthwhile, the integration of concepts of the Reggio Emilia approach warrants consideration of the realities of its application in the North American pre-school.

One solution to this dilemma might be to create a position for a *Music Atelierista* to support the work of the music teacher. Similarly to the atelierista in the Reggio schools who works with small groups of children in an art studio, a Music Atelierista would work with small groups of children in their classroom or in the music room. The atelierista would supplement the group music experience. This may provide a way for children to shape the direction of their own learning without having to compete for a chance to contribute among a large number of classmates. This approach would be more individualized, allowing children with less dominant personalities to determine the direction of their learning without being swayed by the teacher or peers. A Music Atelierista could also take part in communicating with classroom teachers about project work, and organizing and creating documentation. An ideal Music Atelierista would be a teacher trained in music with the capability to guide children in the development of their musical skills, one who also has the capacity to prepare and organize multi-media documentation.

Implications for Further Research

Because of the musical value of early childhood music education and the popularity and success of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education,

further research on the relationship between the two would be valuable for the early childhood education community: its teachers, music teachers, and children. Topics for further research might include: (a) the developmental appropriateness of collaborative music making among different ages of pre-school children as it relates to the Reggio approach, (b) the impact of a Reggio-inspired music curriculum in various socio-economic cultures, (c) the effect of empowering and facilitating children to take responsibility for the documentation of a Reggio-inspired music curriculum, (d) assessment of children's musical development prior to and after their immersion in Reggio-inspired music curriculum and, (e) an examination of the value of musical documentation for classroom teachers and parents.

Conclusion

Music holds a prominent place within the one hundred languages of children. A vehicle for children's self-expression, discovery, experimentation, research, collaboration, reflection, and for their doing, being, and knowing, music, as taught in North American pre-schools, can be inspired and informed by the Reggio Emilia approach. As Sergio Spaggiari (2007), Director of Early Childhood Education for Reggio, said, "You don't begin to build a building on the sixth floor. Similarly, you wouldn't teach children without giving them a strong educational foundation in the first six years." Children deserve a rich foundation in musical education during the valuable years of early childhood, and the influence of Reggio Emilia upon that education can lead to learning that is filled with great beauty and meaning.

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