

September 23, 2007

The Garlanded Classroom

By [GRAHAM BOWLEY](#)



The Reggio Emilia approach at work at Brick Church School.

IT was the Friday before Memorial Day, and at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church Day School near East 73rd Street, a dozen 3- and 4-year-olds accompanied by three teachers trooped past a rabbit cage and a butterfly net. They were on their way to the flower beds outside.

Their classroom was a noisy, sunny space dominated on one wall by a large group-produced painting composed of elaborate blue, orange and yellow shapes. On tables next to a piano sat a flotilla of models fashioned from clay, wire, shells, sticks and washers.

In some respects, the scene resembled that in many of the city's nursery schools. But Madison Avenue Presbyterian is not your ordinary nursery school.

The school is inspired by an approach to teaching young children that was developed in the municipal schools of a northern Italian town called Reggio Emilia. This approach emphasizes the use of art in children's learning and encourages a luxurious beauty in both their work and their surroundings. Classrooms are draped with cloth and garlanded with lattices and vines.



Reggio Emilia precepts at work at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church Day School.

Most of the schools have their own art rooms, called ateliers, which are staffed by full-time art teachers, known as atelieristas.

The approach is based on the assumption that children learn best in groups and are resourceful enough to come up with their own ideas for lessons. Under the Reggio Emilia system, children investigate themes like angels or elevators; in one famous example, they built water wheels and fountains for an amusement park for birds. The method so engages and electrifies children, its supporters contend, that they create work of unparalleled beauty and complexity.

In the opinion of Patricia Pell, director of the Madison Avenue school, the approach is a perfect reflection of the nation where it was developed; as Ms. Pell put it, “It is very much part of the Italian personality to discuss, argue, compare and work collaboratively.”

The Reggio system is developing a following in the United States and, although no hard numbers are available, a growing presence in New York. Hundreds of teachers are making pilgrimages to Reggio Emilia to get ideas for their classrooms. (Full disclosure: The author’s 2-year-old daughter was put on wait lists at two Reggio-inspired schools but not admitted.)

The approach is not without critics. They contend that the cost, which can include thousands of dollars to send teachers abroad for training, makes the approach too expensive for any but the richest private schools; not surprisingly, a nucleus of exclusive Upper East Side nurseries is leading the trend to send teachers to Italy.

Others warn that because the approach lets children choose their own projects, it leaves them bereft of basic academic skills, a disadvantage in New York’s often cutthroat testing culture, in which the search for a place at a top-flight school can border on obsession.

But over the past few years the approach has gained a tentative foothold in the city in private nursery schools and even in some public schools. Although a spokeswoman for the Department of Education could not cite numbers, the system is used in perhaps a dozen city schools. The North American Reggio Emilia Alliance says it has a thousand members nationwide and about 120 in New York State. Of the 249 Americans who visited the town on an educators’ tour last March, 78 were from New York City.

Its supporters say it is helping produce a generation of confident children — risk takers and innovators who are able to think for themselves.



A student at Brick Church School

“Early childhood education is not respected in this country,” Ms. Pell said. “To see it so respected and important in this city in Italy was a relief.”

A Trip to the Sun

A key tenet of the Reggio Emilia approach is that art helps children express

their thoughts. Reggio classrooms are packed with a profusion of innovative materials for the children to work with, such as pebbles, dried orange peel, driftwood, tangles of wire and tin cans. “The environment as the third teacher” is a favorite Reggio phrase.

The approach also tries to make schoolhouses resemble places where everyday life goes on. They are often designed around a central piazza where children can mingle and talk, and they usually include a kitchen with a full-time cook.

A key aspect of the approach, child-led investigative group projects, was on display one morning a few months ago at Brick Church School, a Reggio- inspired institution on East 92nd Street, under the watchful eye of Katherine Gregory and Arlene Hammer, two teachers who had visited Reggio. The 20 4-year-olds of Class 4S, in a large room that overlooked neighboring brownstones, played loudly amid the remnants of a project to investigate space.

”We were doing space, and we said, ‘What would you like to do?’ ” Ms. Gregory said. “They said, we want to have a museum and have all the kids come see.”

Ms. Hammer added: “They said, we want to make the room black. So we had garbage bags and a spaceship from recycled materials. And Nick made a moon.”

And so the day continued.

“We filmed a science lesson,” Ms. Gregory said. “We simulated a trip to the sun. After the trip, they were interviewed and we just filmed it. We had a TV running all day, and children were acting out the Big Bang. Some children gave you a ticket. Some had guard badges. We had a spaceship totally made out of recycled lunch trash.”

The room was filled with evidence of another key element of a Reggio- inspired education: extensive displays of the children’s work and descriptions of that work in the children’s own words. There were butterflies made of paper and caterpillars made of wool. A little girl named Caroline had written, “I made a ring space bracelet.”

The Reggio approach places heavy emphasis on documentation. In the Brick Church classrooms, digital cameras were strewn on tables, and teachers regularly snapped pic-



The teaching approach was invented in Italian classrooms and by Loris Malaguzzi in the 1960s.

tures of the children, including a girl named Elizabeth, who was modeling a delicate yellow rose from beeswax. In some schools, teachers e-mail a daily photographic journal to parents.

According to Brick Church's director, Lydia Spinelli, who has visited Reggio twice in the past two years and has sent 17 of her 23 teachers to Italy, documentation is intended to demonstrate to children that their achievements are taken seriously.

"In education, there is often a problem that teachers focus on what they like to teach and they are not focusing on what the children like learning," said Dr. Spinelli, who has been the school's director for 24 years. "When you document their learning, you know where their thinking is."

Cheese, Vinegar, Activism

The source of all this activity is a prosperous town half an hour from Bologna that is famous for its Parmesan cheese and its balsamic vinegar, and where one recent afternoon, shoppers and people on bikes crowded the pork and toy stalls on the Corso Garibaldi in front of the huddled ochre houses. [Luciano Pavarotti](#), who was born nearby, made his debut at the local opera house.

The town's approach to early childhood education was born in the 1940s when a young journalist and psychologist named Loris Malaguzzi decided to rebuild the war-ravaged school system.

"The town was a leader in the resistance movement, and in the '60s, it was the center for the women's movement," said Rebecca New, an associate professor at [Tufts University](#) who said she began visiting Reggio in 1985. "It is an extremely political group of people who are activists on behalf of what you and I would call social justice.

"Loris Malaguzzi was completely unabashed in his declaration that he wanted to change the education of children," Professor New added. "The community has responded, and the level of community involvement is astonishing. The number of parents' meetings that last until midnight, with coffee, lambrusco and delicious cake, is mind-boggling."

Mr. Malaguzzi was influenced by the other great Italian tradition of early childhood education, founded by the physician Maria Montessori. Both approaches shower seemingly inexhaustible attention and resources on children, and they share a belief in children's inherent capabilities. But unlike the Montessori system, which has sharply defined methods and goals, the Reggio approach is centered on a lack of structure in the curriculum, substituting inventiveness and fluidity.

Pine Trees and Wheelbarrows

The first Malaguzzi school opened in 1963. Today, in a town of 160,000 people, half of Reggio's preschoolers, or 5,000 children, attend the more than 40 Malaguzzi-inspired schools. Some of them are in converted villas in the town center; others are in sun-filled modern buildings in the suburbs. In the Diana school beside the central city park, children's paintings adorn the entrance hallway, and toy wheelbarrows, a climbing frame and water tables stud the large garden beneath a canopy of chestnut and pine trees. Each year, about 3,000 educators visit the town.

"It is very difficult to stay neutral when you see the work that the city has done on behalf of children and families," Professor New said. "At a school meeting, I sat beside an attractive 40-year-old man in a suit who didn't have children in this school, but he had come, he said, because 'I am a citizen.' "

In New York, many parents of children who now attend Reggio-inspired schools have also become ardent fans. They are especially taken with the emphasis on encouraging children to establish goals and pursue them in a focused manner.

"It's a wildfire spreading through New York's early childhood communities," said Don Burton, a former executive of Walt Disney who runs an infant-toddler center on the Upper East Side, and whose 4-year-old son attends Brick Church. "Everyone has got the Reggio bug now."

Maria de' Rossi, a former Lehman Brothers banker whose two sons attended Brick Church, learned about the Reggio approach when the school held an auction to raise money to send teachers to Italy.

She credits the system with helping her son Stefano, 5, respond in an energetic manner after the children in his class went on a trip to the [American Museum of Natural History](#) last February and wrote their responses to photographs taken of the day. "He was a child of few words in the classroom," Ms. de' Rossi said. But thanks to the Reggio approach, she added, "he got more and more verbal about it."

What the Naysayers Say

Despite the widespread praise for the Reggio system, it has also come in for its share of criticism. Cost is a key issue. American schools have tended to rely on parents to pay for the trips to Reggio Emilia, which at a minimum of \$3,500 per teacher for five or six teachers restricts the approach to a highly limited demographic.

In addition, teachers at non-Reggio schools say that several of the system's acclaimed innovations — breaking down barriers between outside and inside, for example — are not really new.

A third shortcoming, say critics, is that the system cannot address the problems faced by American schools. These issues were raised in an article titled "Colonialism and Cargo

Cults in Early Childhood Education: Does Reggio Emilia Really Exist?” The article, written by Richard Johnson, who is a professor of education at the [University of Hawaii](#), was published in 2000 in the journal Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood.

Reggio Emilia’s sudden popularity, Dr. Johnson contended, was typical of fashions in education in which some teachers, wide-eyed and uncritical, were constantly searching for the next new model.

“Thousands of people were running to Reggio,” Dr. Johnson said in an interview. “Why is it not better to keep staff here and decide what’s best for your kids, rather than running to Reggio and bringing it back? Will it serve inner-city New Jersey or out in Nebraska?”

The most frequent criticism is that the system neglects the academic basics that children need to master at an early age, especially in a place like New York, if only to navigate the city’s competitive testing culture and get into a decent kindergarten. The technique’s lack of organization sometimes troubles parents who prefer more structure in the classroom, “especially,” said Ms. de’ Rossi, the former banker, “some of the more highly driven in the Upper East Side market.”

Parental resistance may explain why Reggio Emilia has been slower to take root in New York — where the focus on testing and the rivalry for places is particularly intense — than in some other parts of the country, like California and Atlanta. But a critical mass of Reggio schools appears to be forming in New York.

The city’s Department of Education points to a handful of public schools that are using the approach, among them Public School 321 in Park Slope and P.S. 47, the American Sign Language and English Lower School, on East 23rd Street. Sometimes, Reggio Emilia is used as late as first or second grade.

Rebecca Marshall, P.S. 47’s principal, has sent teachers to Reggio Emilia for training, although they had to pay for their own airfare and hotel rooms. And on Nov. 30, a conference at the [92nd Street Y](#) will bring together for the first time in New York some leading American academics, New York teachers who have visited Reggio, and leaders from Reggio itself.

At Madison Avenue Presbyterian, Ms. Pell is sure that her school’s future will be intertwined with the ideas of the small town in Italy.

“Children have a lot to say,” she said as she stood in the school’s atelier, a narrow room off the library lined with pictures of Manhattan’s important buildings that the children asked to draw after Sept. 11. “It is our job to make sure that they are able to work that out. If they don’t, we have stood in their way.”

