

Aneta Stejzygier, Reggio Social Capital

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Reading a book in an average American preschool means a teacher sitting on a chair, a circle of slightly bored children, and four walls of a classroom, when there is nothing better to do. Reading the very same book in a Reggio Emilia preschool means story telling in all places throughout the city, visiting libraries and museums, concerts and performances; means all day long top quality entertainment. Such entertainment is not only for preschoolers and their families, not only for the town residents, but also for people from the entire region who come to enjoy the cultural event. The preschool project *Reggio Narrates* coordinated by the Laboratory Theatre came out simply of a book reading, and ends up with a cultural festival on May 6-9 on the streets of Reggio Emilia, a mid-size city in the northern Italy with beautiful old buildings, post-modern bridges, and the network of 33 preschools that makes the city famous.

How such a thing is possible? Imagining that the University of Sorbonne frames cultural life of the residents of Paris might be easier, but believing that educational institutions at the preschool level influence and actually transform the life of an entire city is hard to comprehend. But, it has actually happened. Out of book readings in Reggio preschools comes out the idea of getting parents involved in the activity. They are invited to come to the preschool and to bring their favorite book for children that they used to enjoy in their childhood, or the book their children love to read now. They come, they share, and they try to read. But many of them do not know how to read books, they get shy or are not able to maintain their audience's attention, do not know how to hold their interest. So, the series of workshops for parents are organized. Reggio educators

always take children and their families to the right places: they gain their knowledge about dancing from a choreographer or a professional dancer, they listen to and about music from a musician, and they learn how to express themselves through art from an artist: an atelierista. Reading workshops also fit such a standard: parents are to learn how to tell and invent stories but not in a preschool, but in contextually authentic places such as theatres; not from preschool teachers, but from actors, authors of books for children, and illustrators. There are two courses running for six weeks. “The project has its roots in the past”, says Antonia Monticelli, the teacher of the Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia Laboratorio Rodari, “when parents used to organize parties and performances inside the schools” (2009). But, now the project goes far beyond the preschools; it goes to libraries, museums, theatres, primary schools, hospitals, it goes to every place where people gather either for pleasure or out of necessity. Children and their families have gained skills for entertaining story reading, and now during the event they read, tell, invent, and act them out; they make the books alive.

Reggio Narrates is one out of many projects giving life to the city of Reggio Emilia. There has been *The dialogue with the places* project that started from children running through a column room of the Malaguzzi Center, took a year and ended with a meaningful, choreographically advanced dance of children accompanied by music in the Reggio Emilia theater. Throughout the year children gained the first hand knowledge about math, geometry, and acquired engineering skills by building a replica of the column room in their own facility; they learned how to listen to and appreciate music; they improved their kinetic intelligence, they learned how to move in a coordinated way,

and how to use symbolism for expressing ideas: they created the entire catalog of symbols representing certain body movements in which for example a short wavy line meant jump and a long line of spots meant walking. There was *The Amusement Park for Birds* project at the Villetta school in which “children designed and built an outdoor amusement park for the birds that come to their playground” (Reggio Children, 1992). Simultaneously, there are many smaller projects activating the life of preschool communities such as *Geography* project inspired by a letter from Brazil received by one of the children in the Andersen preschool, or the *Works of Human Body* in the Andersen preschool as well. The projects are not only a fantastic approach that allows cross curriculum learning and facilitates gaining knowledge through meaningful experiences but also lets children become active members of their community, who are respected due to what they give to the city: not only the exceptional intellectual value, but also world-wide recognition.

What makes Reggio preschools so unique is not their constructivism derived from Piaget and Vygotsky, not a project approach as “in-depth studies of significant topics” (Katz & Cesarone, 1994, p. 14), not their style of documentation understood as means of both observation and assessment, and expression of reciprocity between children and a teacher, not even the emergent curriculum, a term recently upgraded to the contextual curriculum; the concept of curriculum yet is quite foreign and it is used by Reggio educators only as means to be understood by non-Italians, or more precise non-Reggians who are accustomed to thinking in such terms. “For us in Reggio”, writes Carlina Rinaldi, the president of Reggio Children, “*progettazione* is a word that is very dear to us, and is something different from curriculum. *Progettazione* is a strategy, a

daily practice of observation – interpretation – documentation” (2006, p. 206). What makes Reggio preschools truly unique is the city’s rich social capital based on “collaboration, mutual assistance, civic obligations, and even trust” (Putnam, 1993, p. 130) that is possible only in a society that has developed strong connections within and between civic engagements, and has achieved high level of reciprocity and trust that allow people to work collaboratively and achieve common goals. Unlike societies “oriented toward the individual in competition” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 139) such as the Americans who above everything treasure an individual and their rights, or the Polish society which for last two decades has been struggling to develop similar individualism, the Reggio community is oriented toward the individual, yes, but “the individual constructed with others, who seeks out others” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 139). But, no society gains such a social capital overnight. In Reggio, making it a dominant force driving the city life took years. The present high level of participation in the preschool activities of the city cultural institutions, theatres, museums, of the city local authorities, of schools, families, and entrepreneurs is rooted in “collective life in cohesive communities” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 9) of the early 20th century and later after the Second World War, and has been highly reciprocal. As Tiziana Filippini, the pedagoga of the Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia says: “Our city gives life to the preschools and the preschools give identity to the city” (2009).

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