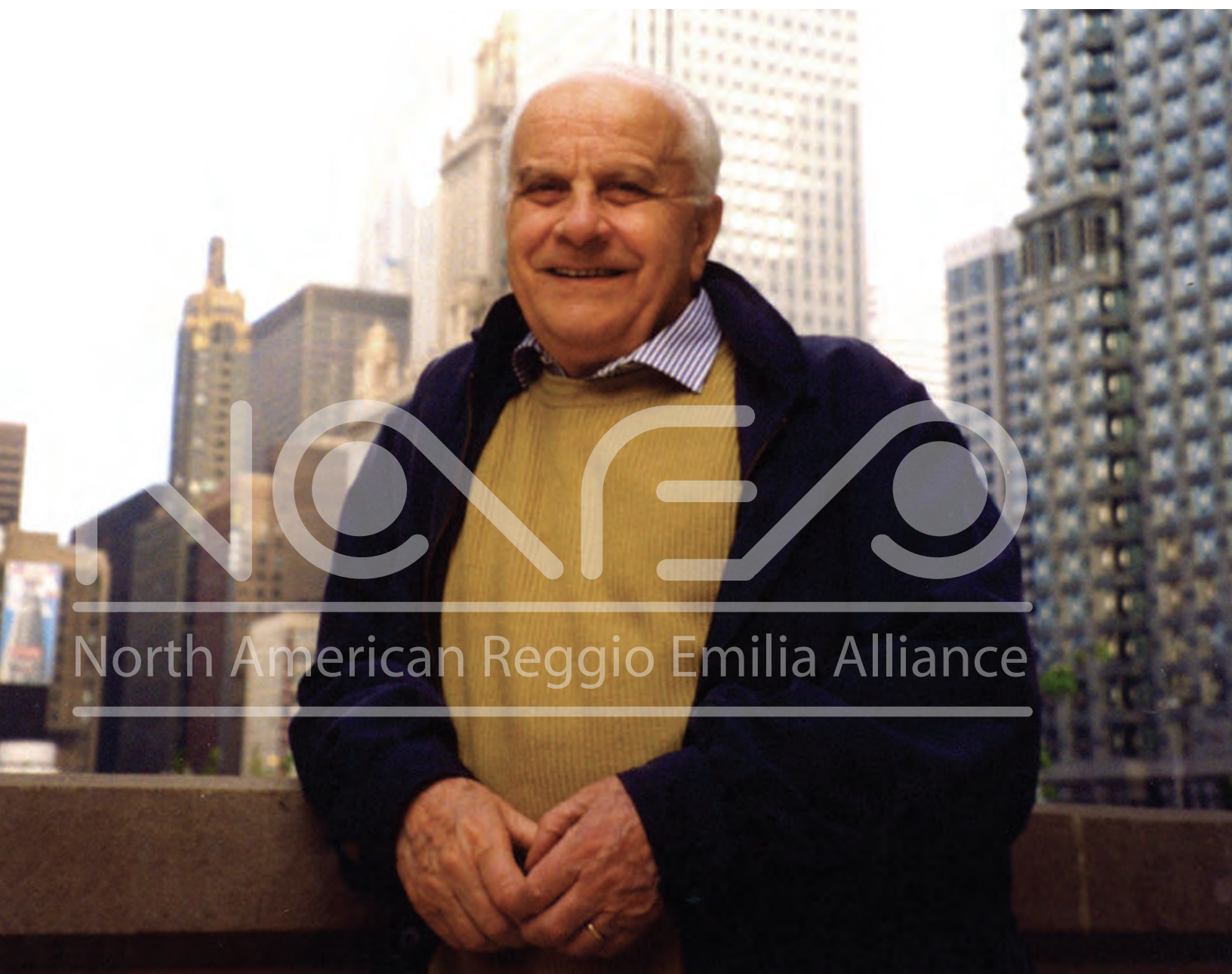


Innovations

In Early Education:
The International
Reggio Emilia Exchange



North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

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MEDIA REVIEW

Participation is an Invitation: Citizen, Citizenship, Participation

by Julie K. Biddle, Ph.D.



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Overall Summary

Participation is an Invitation: Citizen, Citizenship, Participation is a video resulting from a collaborative project between *Fotografia Europea*, an international photography festival, and the schools in Reggio Emilia. This collaboration started in 2008 and is an opportunity for the work of the children from the infant-toddler centers to middle schools (ages 3-14) to be exhibited annually in the city. *Participation is an Invitation* was part of the 2012 festival. The theme that year was “Common Life: Images for the Community of Citizens.” As Paola Cagliari comments in the program notes, “The collaborative project with *Fotografia Europea* derived from an idea of schools that have close relationships with their community, a place where the democracy of knowledge is practiced and the right of citizenship is exercised” (Reggio Children, 2010, p. 13). The relationship that the schools in Reggio Emilia have with their community is well documented. This video emphasizes these relationships through many expressive languages. Children investigate the meaning of participation, of citizenship, of belonging, and feeling welcomed. Meetings and conversations, held in small groups of children, offer scrutiny of these ideas. Many of the photos show the point of view of children such as reflections in car windows, spines of books about the city, dignitaries at *Museo del Tricolore in Piazza Prampolini*, market day in *Piazza Prospero*, conversations between

groups of men – to name a few. The video is a compilation of voices and images as children explored the city, eavesdropped on conversations, and took photos. The result is a narration of what it means to these children to participate, to exercise the right of citizenship, to feel welcomed in the community, to belong. These are timely topics. What does it mean to feel welcomed, to be a citizen and exercise one’s citizenship in today’s world where groups are still considered “other” and segregated and disenfranchised? Listening to the wisdom of children can be instructive and the video offers the viewer this opportunity.

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Reflections on the Video

It's hard for me to view this video without recalling my visits to Reggio Emilia. The context for one visit in particular frames my lens for this review. I had the privilege of participating in the July 2010 (2-week) Summer School in Reggio Emilia. I remember thinking about and seeing the changes in the city since my previous trip in 2004. Reggio Emilia had become a much more diverse city in just six years. During my two weeks in Reggio Emilia in 2010, I saw "sandwich boards" on the sidewalks and in piazzas displaying what were considered "bad manners" in the city. Each image on the sandwich boards started with "Reggio is your home" and addressed various ways to behave. For example, Reggio is your home so don't be uncivilized, respect those who live near you. Reggio is your home, so don't smudge (spray paint) the walls, take care of your city. Reggio is your home, so don't throw bottles on the ground, use special containers. As someone who doesn't speak Italian, the illustrations on these signs were graphic enough for me to understand the messages before I translated them. These messages were visual representations of the changing face(s) of Reggio Emilia.

I remember Reggio educators being very open about the shift from being primarily a monolingual and monoreligious city to one where multiple languages could be heard and many religions were practiced. The Reggio educators expressed the challenges/opportunities they faced as more and more non-Italians were living in the city and their children were attending the infant-toddler centers and preschools. In 2010, the student population in some of the municipal schools was 50% non-Italian (personal notes). Many conversations during the Summer School focused on the meaning of welcoming - welcoming as an experience, as an expression of intelligence and active involvement that includes the concepts of recognition and reciprocity (Margini, 2010, p. 3). Reggio educators emphasized how important it is to develop in each citizen a sense of belonging through knowing

that they have access to all of the city's services. They see this sense of belonging as a very important guarantee for the ongoing quality of various city services (Margini, 2010, p. 1). Because the schools are often the first services families with young children seek out, Reggio educators created multiple ways to welcome immigrant families (e.g., the use of cultural mediators, translating documents into multiple languages).

A highlight of the Summer School was hearing about the immigrant experiences from some of the immigrant parents. One parent, Nadia, a mother of three children, was poignant in her comments. She shared how she was in Reggio Emilia, with no extended family. She recalled taking all her questions and doubts (that had nothing to do with the school) to the teachers and they helped her. They welcomed her. The cooks in the school even helped her learn how to prepare Italian food because her children wanted to eat Italian food (personal notes).

This experience in Reggio Emilia helped shape my viewing of *Participation is an Invitation*. The voices of the children in the video echo much of what I heard from Reggio educators during the weeks of the 2010 Summer School.

"We have to make the world a better place . . . welcoming."

"If you want to be a citizen you should think a little bit, not so much, about the differences but about the things we have in common."

"It's not easy to build a community, where people aren't undervalued, but also only treated badly because they think differently not only for races, religions and disabilities also some of the people have different ideas, problems, and so on and so on. Everybody has to make themselves treat people equally without excluding anything."

Because the schools are places that encourage curiosity toward others and because schools are places that are sensitive and open to

the interpretations of others, these children offered their ideas about participation and citizenship and shared freely in their small group conversations.

Within our experience, we have seen how children have enormous capacity for welcoming and feeling empathy, in particular, for children that seem to have difficulty living within a new environment and expressing themselves as a part of a different culture. We, as adults, see this openness on the part of children and realize that we have to learn from them. (Margini, 2010, p. 4)

Questions for the Reader to Consider

If the school is to be viewed as an agent of social change, then we must confront some of what is taught in our schools. There must be a shift in the human history that is promulgated by textbooks, and class discussions need to be open to varying perspectives. Like the Italians, we need to remember that children in our classes are often multilingual. Languages and use of words matter. In order to be welcoming of all children and their families, we must be more aware of any involuntary bias and discrimination that resides within us. There must be opportunities for dialogue. There has to be an invitation to participate in these crucial conversations. Sergio Spaggiari (2010) reminds us,

In a community of people that is built on an ever growing web of social interaction and a network of exchange, communica-

tion itself becomes the primary connector of the entire fabric of participation, the unifying agent that binds the most diverse and distant elements of this multiform and complex social system that we call a center or school for young children. (p. 129)

Schools serve as the place for not only instruction, but also dialogue. The video being reviewed demonstrates this so well. Margini (2010) emphasized,

We believe that the school can be a place where, through dialogue, we will be able to increase the level of freedom for the children. That freedom is the direction the children are moving in this new identity that they feel for themselves, a freedom that's understood as intentionally giving space to plurality. When the children have experiences involving different cultures, the school consciously builds itself up as a community of experiences, which welcomes signs of different cultures. A school with many signs and many languages is open to participation and belonging as a choice. (p.7)

What choices will our schools make? What messages will they send? Will they be welcoming? Will space be given to plurality? Will they be open to many languages so that belonging is a choice and there is an invitation to participate? "Participation depends on creating a culture of social concern. Such a culture nourishes our educational experience and puts all of us into the role of constructing human decency, spreading hope, and promoting emancipation" (Spaggiari, 2010, p. 132).

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