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The Process of Change Among Staff and Faculty of a Child Development Laboratory

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Appendix D - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Gretchen Edlemon

College: Human Ecology Department: Child & Family Studies

Faculty Mentor: Melissa Groves

PROJECT TITLE: The Process of Change Among Staff and Faculty of a Child Development Laboratory

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Melissa M. Groves, Faculty Mentor

Date: July 26, 1999

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

As Gretchen worked with faculty, staff, and graduate students in completing this project, she functioned as a team member in the conception of the project as well as the analysis of the results. She worked independently to collect the information and in writing up the results.
The Process of Change Among Staff and Faculty of a Child Development Laboratory

Gretchen Eddlemon
Senior Honors Project
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Melissa Groves
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Abstract

The objective of this project is to document the process of change in the Child Development Laboratory (CDL) among CDL administrators, teachers, and staff. The researcher is an undergraduate student and a participant in the CDL. The context of this qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the adaptation and study of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) in the CDL. The initiation of the study of REA in the CDL was October of 1997.

This project is part of a larger ongoing study. In the larger study, qualitative research methods are being used such as observation and record keeping at staff meetings, observation and record keeping at parent meetings, informal field notes of adult participant behavior, electronic mail discussions, questionnaires, and interviews. For this project, questionnaires completed by CDL staff and follow-up interviews conducted by the researcher were the primary data collection methods.

The researcher found that among staff of the CDL, the most important aspects of the REA were beliefs in the importance of the competence of children, the environment, teacher collaboration, documentation, and art. The research also indicated that change typically began in the physical environment and later progressed into change of attitudes and beliefs about young children and their education. Disequilibrium was noted in teachers’ responses to REA in the dichotomous descriptions given in the questionnaires and interviews.

This project will help researchers, teachers, and parents understand the process of curricular change. By joining the PAR project, each participant has the potential to gain valuable insights into the process of change within the organization of the CDL. Likewise, this information may be used by other early childhood educators in similar situations of implementing organizational change.
Overview of the Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education is a world-renowned, innovative, and complex system that has its earliest roots in post-war Italy. Following the devastation of World War II, the communities around the Italian city of Reggio Emilia attempted to salvage hope for the people by providing quality education for their young children. Thus started the evolution of early childhood education in Reggio Emilia that today consists of 19 preschool programs and 13 infant-toddler centers, all of which are city-run and open to children of all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The Reggian approach, which has been in a constant state of change and growth over the past thirty years, is both complex and compelling. Attempting to encapsulate the primary components of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) is a difficult task; this portion of the paper will make an honest endeavor to explore the basic parts of the REA in a concise fashion.

Underlying and included in each of the intricate parts of the Reggio Emilia Approach is something the Italians call "the image of the child." The image of the child basically refers to the belief that children are capable and competent individuals who have rights rather than needs. Children are seen as strong, curious, and having great potential to learn and grow. A great deal of respect is given to children's ideas and thoughts about how the world works, and this respect is manifested throughout the Reggian approach, as will be seen in this portion of the paper. Having a grasp of the importance of the image of the child
will enable one to begin to form some understanding of the Reggio Emilia
Approach to education.

Another component of the REA is the importance of the environment. The
environment is considered to be a crucial part of the education of young children
and is carefully and purposefully arranged to not only provide comfort and beauty
but provoke learning and interaction. Consideration is taken in every aspect of
the physical environment from paint colors to dishes used at meals. Reggian
centers are filled with natural light, plants and mirrors. Perhaps the most striking
physical component of Reggian centers is the amount of children's work
displayed, capturing the eye in every direction. Children's drawings, sculptures,
wire constructions, collages, words, and other creations are displayed throughout
each center. Careful documentation of the processes of children's learning is
prominently displayed, placing a high value on these processes.

Collaboration is an important part of early childhood education in the
schools of Reggio Emilia. The education of children is seen as a complex
process which involves not only children and teachers but also parents and the
community. Teachers collaborate amongst themselves to expand on children's
ideas, and provide materials and ideas that will aid children in building their own
knowledge and learning experiences. Close attention is paid to the
conversations children have, extracting from those conversations the ideas
children have and how those ideas are tied into their interests. The rings of
collaboration are many, from collaboration among co-teachers and staff at each
school to collaboration with special pedagogical coordinators and directors.
A complex and unique part of the Reggio Emilia Approach is the use of documentation. A simple definition of documentation in the context of early childhood education is the representation of both children's processes of learning and the content of that learning. In Reggio Emilia, documentation is made in a number of ways that represent the process of learning. Written transcripts of children's conversations, photographs, video and audio tapes, and children's works are the major items included in Reggian documentation.

Documentation has many purposes in Reggian schools. To begin with, documentation is used to enable children to revisit and reflect on what they have learned and accomplished. Through this revisitation, children are able to better understand their own processes of learning and take the next step in learning about a subject or topic. Documentation also is useful to teachers. In preparing and examining documentation of children's learning, teachers are able to envision the directions that children are going with an idea and scaffold the children's learning. Documentation also allows teachers to reflect on their own growing skills as teachers of young children. A third purpose of documentation is to provide information to others about the learning that is occurring in a particular classroom. Parents, administrators, and the community can view documentation panels and pieces and begin to understand and join the children in their learning.

Documentation of children's learning is closely correlated with Reggio Emilia's use of projects. The project approach is a way of learning for children which involves in-depth exploration of a specific topic. Children are allowed to form their own theories and hypotheses about how something works, investigate
and research the topic, and represent the process along the way. Some project topics studied in Reggio Emilia include “City” and “Dinosaurs.” The team of teachers works together to find out children’s interests, discuss possibilities for expansion on those interests, provide materials and experiences which allow children to explore and investigate, and determine which steps to take next according to the children’s interests. Throughout the length of a project, teachers work to assess the need to either continue a project or move on to another topic. Some projects may last only a few days, while some can be investigated for months. Documentation occurs of the process of the project from its inception to its finish.

Another remarkable aspect of the Reggio Emilia Approach is the commitment of families and community to support and play a role in the education of their young children. Parents are deeply involved in their children’s education; the city shows the high value it places on early childhood education through involvement and the financial support of over ten percent of the city’s budget. The Reggio schools are also highly inclusive and give priority registration to children with disabilities.

A final belief inherent in the Reggio Emilia Approach is the idea that children have “100 Languages” with which to express themselves. A few of these languages are words, music, movement, drawing, sculpting, and shadow play. The importance of recognizing the variety of ways that children can express themselves is seen through the inclusion of a well-equipped art studio in each center. Children are exposed to various art materials from an early age,
having opportunities to explore and manipulate the materials. Children are also taught different techniques that are useful in creating visual representations of learning and knowledge.

As one can see, the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education is extremely complex; each idea mentioned above could be elaborated upon to great depths. Because the REA is always evolving, one’s understanding of it is also perpetually in a state of change and growth. The dynamic nature of the REA is in itself a principle found within the approach; knowledge and learning are processes that never reach an endpoint.

This portion of the paper was written using a combination of information from *The Hundred Languages of Children*, edited by Carolyn Edwards, Lelia Gandini, and George Forman, and *First Steps Toward Teaching the Reggio Way*, edited by Joanne Hendrick. For further reference, please see reference page.
A Brief Overview of the
UTK Child Development Laboratories

The University of Tennessee Child Development Laboratories are operated by the Child and Family Studies Department, which is within the College of Human Ecology. The CDL serves children six weeks to five years of age across three sites and is an inclusive environment that enrolls children with special needs as well. The age groups are broken up into an infant program, a toddler program, and a preschool program. According to the Child Development Laboratories Staff Handbook, the labs exist for three purposes:

1) to promote observation, participation, and research activities of the Department of Child and Family Studies and other university faculty and students;

2) to prepare undergraduate and graduate child development professionals for working effectively with young children;

3) to provide a model early childhood education program for children, families, and early childhood professionals.

Families of children enrolled in the CDL are aware that their children will be observed, videotaped, and photographed as part of the lab experience. This study of children is done for the purpose of education and training of new teachers.

The program philosophy of the CDL brings together information from child development, early childhood education, child psychology and special education. Including the domains of personal awareness, emotional well-being, socialization, cognition, communication, and perceptual motor in its curricular
goals, the labs are committed to the development of the whole child. According to the staff handbook, the labs see optimal development as including:

- A feeling of self-worth and self-confidence
- The capacity to trust, respect, and invest emotionally in people
- Effective interpersonal and social interaction skills
- The ability to act and think independently and to develop self-control
- Skill in communicating ideas and feelings
- Understanding and organization of information about the physical and social environment
- Acquisition and use of problem-solving skills
- Curiosity about the world and pleasure in learning and exploring

The Child Development Labs began studying the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education in the fall of 1997. Shortly thereafter, several staff members from the labs and a faculty member from the Child and Family Studies Department participated in an intense learning experience which involved an in-depth study of the REA and a visit to the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Since the inception of the study of the REA, study methods have included an optional monthly meeting and attendance of various conferences. Staff members are encouraged to read *The Hundred Languages of Children*; this book has formed the basis for the monthly discussion group. Less formal study methods are being used as well, such as informal discussions that occur among teachers throughout the week.