Including the Child With Special Needs: Learning From Reggio Emilia

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Inclusive education aims toward integrating special needs students into all events of the typical classroom. For North American educators, the process of inclusion does not unfold naturally as in the routines of the Reggio Emilia approach. Reggio’s powerful image of the child nourishes the authentic practice of maximizing each child’s capabilities. With that, inclusion has the potential to reduce fear, to build respect and understanding not only in school life, but for the future as well.

The purpose of this article is to identify and illustrate key principles within the Reggio ideals that can foster new beliefs and attitudes regarding inclusion. The goal is for teachers to consider alterations in their philosophies and practices concerning inclusion, and work toward adopting the research and making it into one of practice.

As an early childhood consultant, I have repeatedly encountered teachers’ feelings of apprehension when confronted with today’s widespread issue of inclusion. Significant obstacles continue to prevent efficient integration despite many who embrace the philosophy. Because increasing numbers of children with disabilities are mainstreamed into regular classrooms, teachers are feeling anxious about whether they can fulfill the expectations of full inclusion. From novice to the most experienced educators, the questions remain: How can I provide quality education with my knowledge of special needs? How can I ensure that all children receive the support they require to develop and learn?

In North America, inclusion of special needs children is a rather recent phenomenon. Although discussed in the early 1970s (Allen, Benning, & Drummond, 1972; Bricker & Bricker, 1971), inclusion has only come to the forefront in the 1990s. Research repeatedly confirms the positive outcomes emanating from preschool inclusion. Special needs students have performed better overall in inclusive settings than in isolated settings (Hundert, Mahoney, Mundy, & Vernon, 1998). Furthermore, special needs students demonstrate improved behavior due to participating...
with typically developing children (Hanline, 1993; Levine & Antia, 1997). Meanwhile, various studies have substantiated that typically developing children have matured with positive attitudes, increased understanding, and respect toward children with disabilities when partaking in inclusive school environments (Diamond & Hestenes, 1994a, 1994b; Hauser-Cram, Bronson, & Upshur, 1993; Peck, Carlson, & Helmstetter, 1992).

In 1991, Newsweek magazine distinguished the Reggio Emilia approach as the pioneer in quality early childhood practices that has gained recognition, respect, and adaptation globally. Inspired and developed in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy, its ideals and values form one of the most stimulating advances in the realm of education of the young and is regarded worldwide as a model for systems today (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1991).

Inclusion is embraced in the Reggio Emilia approach. Children with special needs are regarded as worthy. Although there may be waiting lists for the government-run infant–toddler centers in Italy, it is the child with special needs who receives preferred acceptance. Children are integrated mindfully, with the support of parents and careful observation of teachers. If additional assistance is required, aides are provided. Typically only one special needs child is included in a group. The intention is to limit adults present in the classroom so as not to disturb the children’s formation of a community (Smith, 1998), a further example of how Reggio values permeate the environment.

There is much to be gained by considering Reggio’s approach to inclusive education and how it can be translated into our practices here in North America. Being a lifelong student of Reggio methodology, my journey continues as I develop and communicate through my collaborations, experiences, dialogues, and reflections. Through this article I hope to expose the essential components that support different thinking about inclusion. With his objective in mind, this article will emphasize the contributions of the following:

1. The Reggio Emilia image of the child and role of the teacher.
2. The commitment to communication and collaboration with parents.
3. The power of projects.

**Turning to Reggio Emilia: The Image of the Child and the Role of the Teacher**

“Face those fears.” Thus begins the progression toward accepting special needs children into the classroom. The essential Reggio principle that supports this challenge is the image of the child as competent and appreciated. Rooted in philosophies of theorists such as Dewey, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, and Biber, the Reggio vision has evolved into considering the child as strong, rich, and capable (Fraser, 2006). All children are regarded as resourceful, curious, imaginative, and inventive, and possess a desire to interact and communicate with others and their environment (Cadwell, 1997). The child is treated with ultimate regard for his individuality for learning to occur (Gandini, 1994). It is crucial that this image persists throughout all interactions.

Likewise, the teacher’s role of nurturer, guide, and facilitator is formed. Gandini (1994) reminded us that educators must have respect for children to allow development to happen. Envisaging all children as capable activates the teacher’s role (Edwards, 1993). By providing materials for open-ended discovery and problem solving, listening and observing closely, teachers uncover children’s thoughts, theories, and curiosities.

When I consider the impact of child and teacher images, I instantly recall my year with 4-year-old Jake (pseudonym). He was diagnosed with language delay, motor difficulties, sensory processing disorders, and struggled when interacting socially. Although I had some experience with other less complex issues, I hardly considered myself an expert. I began to doubt my ability to provide the necessary support for Jake and make my classroom one where inclusion worked for all. However, I was optimistic that I could establish a foundation within my own beliefs and my vision of the classroom community. My mandate was to become responsive to Jake’s individual needs and
abilities, while ensuring his belonging to the group. This step toward genuine inclusiveness represented a deep change in my values and approach, as it transformed basic cultural assumptions with which many of us grew up. Those assumptions negatively labeled and segregated special needs children, demonstrating practices of exclusion rather than inclusion. I felt compelled to break away from those values and would not allow similar practices to take place.

I turned to the Reggio image of the child for inspiration, valuing Jake as a boy with capabilities and interests rather than a child in need. To determine his capabilities and what challenges he might encounter, keen observation became vitally important. My plan was to support Jake through active experiences. What persisted within my inquiry was this image of the child as competent, one of the fundamental principles that fosters inclusive practice. Specifically, during an exploration into color and texture, a significant experience occurred. Finding delight in using "odd" tools to paint with, our group began collecting items in and around the school with the intention of experimenting in the classroom. Jake was very much part of our gathering event, and I was pleased to observe his relaxed participation. On our return to class, Jake, along with the other children, arranged the materials. Because his previous attempts to handle wet objects resulted in a gag reflex and severe anxiety, he withdrew from applying the paint. Jake handed his friends their new tools, being very cautious not to touch the paint he so feared. I was glad to perceive him interacting socially, but I sensed his desire to participate fully. As I mounted each child's artwork with a clothespin, I realized my hands had stayed clear of paint. Immediately, I asked Jake to provide me with the tools to create a picture at the easel. I demonstrated how I could attach a clothespin to a twig and paint without getting my hands wet. I asked Jake if he would like to attempt my technique. He cautiously took the clothespin from me and began to pick up the tools using this attachment. (The physical exercise of pinching the clothespin was equally imperative as his fine motor control was feeble as well.) He gently dipped the fastened materials into the paint and smeared them onto paper. His joy was apparent as he giggled and declared, “I’m painting!” His peers assembled around him and expressed their delight in his accomplishment. Soon they all began experimenting with our clothespin technique.

This groundbreaking experience provided Jake with a strategy to actively participate. Eventually he began to take other risks at manipulating materials. The class community evolved as well as it was now his peers who assisted him in uncovering methods to find his comfort level. They coached him, supported him, and celebrated his successes. At times, it was Jake who taught others how to maneuver his invented tools.

The scholarship that resulted from this occurrence was invaluable. I had learned to view Jake as capable and deserving. As a facilitator and guide, I was able to provide and encourage him in a fashion that he accepted graciously. Notably, our relationship developed into one of reciprocal trust. Flexible practice was what kept Jake in a comfort zone while changes unfolded naturally. Edwards (1998) highlighted this important method of teaching “as complex and delicate, constantly evolving and changing, and a matter of collective effort and concerns” (p. 178). The richness is not only in the teacher’s personal gratification, but becomes embedded in authentic teacher practice which contributes to humanity.

Clearly, the image of the child emerges. In Jake’s case, his unique and capable qualities surfaced and were respected. These events confirm Lewin’s (1995) support of the Reggio ideals: we shape ourselves through our exchanges with our environment, peers, adults, and symbols. The class community had evolved and Jake had become an equal member of our group. Without hesitation, I call this inclusion.

Committing to Communication and Collaboration With Parents

Reggio ideals concentrate profoundly on the three protagonists in the education process: the child, the teacher, and the parents (Gandini, 1993). Home and school relationships are considered fundamental and take on many approaches. Par-
ents’ participation can encompass daily interactions in the classroom, volunteering in the work of the school’s special events, and participating as board members, to name a few (Gandini, 1997). The essential component is that parents are expected to be partners, supporting not only their child’s learning, but additionally contributing toward the benefit of all the children in the school (Cadwell, 1997). It is through their interactions and relationships that the school community is fostered. As affirmed by Gandini (1996), “Children have a right to high quality care and education that support the development of their potentials” (p. 46). Due to of their crucial role, parents too have the right to be involved in the life of the school. The Reggio Emilia society and its approach to the well-being of all children epitomize a caring community.

Indeed, these principles can be even better appreciated when it comes to the subject of inclusion. Powerful relationships allow teacher and parents to welcome the knowledge of each other while emphasizing their common goal, the well-being and education of the child. Palmer (1998–1999) has spoken eloquently about dialogue, connection to the community, and the shared formation of meaning that is the heart of education. The Reggio approach comprises the exchange of ideas between teacher and parent within a community that proposes a culture rich in meaning. However, building the key principle of partnership is not always trouble-free. Families may have different expectations than teachers. Schools may not know how to relate to the changes in today’s family structures (LeBahn, 1995). Sometimes parents do not have a feeling of being welcomed at school. In many cases, parents may not regard education as important and they may lack knowledge themselves (Dixon, 1992; Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). Problems may range from parents bringing negative experiences from childhood, scheduling conflicts, and unfortunately, at times, an unwillingness to participate.

As an illustration of the importance of genuine home and school relationships, I recall an experience that rendered me a true believer. An energetic 4-year-old girl joined our preschool 3 years ago. After the introductory weeks, her teacher approached me to discuss some atypical behavior the girl displayed that was proving to be difficult to manage. Carolyn (a pseudonym) was particularly active and was having difficulty controlling herself physically when interacting with her peers, materials, and environment. Other children were getting hurt and Carolyn herself experienced several mishaps. After additional observations by the teacher and myself, we felt it was imperative to meet with her parents to invite communication as well as ask them for their input and collaboration to better plan for their daughter.

Unfortunately, our meeting did not go as intended. Carolyn’s parents simply did not respond. Although surprised by their reaction, I emphasized our conviction that together we could provide the necessary support for Carolyn. Carolyn’s mother left abruptly, communicating her resentment for our “overreaction” to a very spirited child. However, Carolyn’s father waited and insisted on discussing the issues further. An emotional father then revealed that Carolyn had great difficulty in her previous school. Accidents were plentiful, and teachers telephoned many times to have Carolyn picked up from school as they were unable to control her outbursts and physical aggression. There were recommendations for professional assessments but Carolyn’s mother refused. She believed Carolyn would eventually conform and would “outgrow” this behavior. I can recall thinking at the time how unfortunate it was that Carolyn’s parents did not share their knowledge with us at the start. Together we could have planned for an easier integration and perhaps a more fitting environment.

I continue to believe that parents know their child best and what may be their needs. What was obviously lacking, in Carolyn’s case, was the element of trust and belief in envisioning school and teachers as partners, compared to Jake’s case, when our educational staff was aware of his profile before school began. His parents had not only disclosed pertinent information but assisted in constructing the essential partnership for Jake’s development to occur. Cadwell (2003) identified this partnership as a “journey” that becomes meaningful for all protagonists. Due to this, practices do not rely on final outcomes, but on the pro-
cesses that transpire. Accordingly, parents and educators together advocate for the child with honest and open communication, which further resonates school as a community.

Similarly, my 2-year experience with Daniel and his family proved to be a collaboration that worked for his inclusion and development. Born in Russia, and adopted by Canadian parents, Daniel was diagnosed with global developmental delays by the age of 3. Due to a lack of expected sensory stimulation at pivotal times in his beginning months of life, Daniel became delayed in areas of cognition, language, motor, and sensory abilities. Daniel’s parents were committed to having him attend “regular” school and were open to finding the best routes for him. They believed that if Daniel interacted with typically developing children, he would begin to strengthen his limitations. Daniel’s parents viewed him as strong, unique, and capable. They respected who he was and admired his determination—a powerful image of the child indeed. Most importantly, Daniel’s parents requested to be active participants in his school life for him to feel a sense of belonging and to maintain practices at home. I got to know Daniel through my conversations with his parents. They shared his strengths, difficulties, and what strategies worked best for him when in learning situations.

As an example, Daniel’s parents informed me of some intense apprehensions he experienced in his previous school. When a special event occurred, or a class guest arrived, Daniel cried incessantly and would not even enter the room. Daniel’s parents related that when they were notified beforehand, and had the opportunity to discuss the upcoming events with him, it allowed for a somewhat easier integration. I remembered a parallel practice that was originally developed for autistic children. Gray (2000) generated the concept of social stories that assists anxious children in dealing with a situation, skill, or concept. Educators would write a short story (in a designed format) involving the child. This story would always affirm something the child did well but would focus on providing an improved understanding of expectations as well as appropriate responses.

I used this tool to prepare Daniel for a visit from a puppet theater. I presented the agenda by writing a story with Daniel: “Our Day at the Puppet Show.” Besides including his contribution of the friends with whom he would like to sit, I drew a picture of him going to the gym, watching the show with a big smile on his face, and then saying “goodbye” to the puppeteer. Daniel shared his personal storybook with his parents for 2 weeks before the event. His mother related that he wanted it read to him nightly and eventually he “read” the story on his own. On the day of the show, Daniel, book in hand, joined his classmates and watched an entire puppet show for his first time. He followed the program by turning the applicable pages of his book. The social story had achieved its purpose of assisting Daniel to be included in the enjoyment of the show. It provided him with a plan and helped him follow through with appropriate responses. Undeniably, because his mother enlisted me as partner, I was able to translate into practice what worked well for Daniel.

Spaggiari (1993) has identified that the imparting of ideas between parents and teachers promotes a new way of educating. Within this premise of collaboration, educators respect the important component of collegiality with families and are able to assimilate different perspectives. As a result of this practice of parent as partner, Daniel continued to grow and develop profoundly during his preschool years.

The Inspiration of Projects and Documentation

Project investigation, in Reggio Emilia schools, is the main educational vehicle that guides learning (Gardner, 1998). The fundamental component is to allow topics to emanate from the child’s interest and then have them supported by the teacher’s observation, guidance, and facilitation. Skills and knowledge are expanded as children work in groups or on their own. Documentation is the window that allows the adult to share and gain insight into how the child has developed understanding and how he or she has carried out his or her work (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998). Through this process, teachers scrutinize, gather, and interpret chil-
children’s work to communicate and review with colleagues and parents (Rinaldi, 1998).

Katz (1989) has targeted the importance of early years when children’s natural dispositions to be curious and to investigate their environments thrive. Gandini (1997) stated the following:

Projects provide the backbone of the children’s and teacher’s learning experiences. They are based on the strong conviction that learning by doing is of great importance and that to discuss in groups and to revisit ideas and experiences is the premier way of gaining better understanding and learning. (p. 7)

However, many educators feel that project work is inappropriate for children with special needs (Edmiaston, 1998). Contrary to this thinking, I have witnessed great triumphs while observing and documenting special needs students involved in project work. In fact, within that same research in inclusive settings, Edmiaston later uncovered that all children can benefit from project work. He confirmed that every learner has interests and the experiences can be shaped to meet individual needs. Within that premise, teachers can set objectives while they are focusing on children’s abilities (Edmiaston, 1998).

For months I had observed Daniel enjoying a construction toy involving gears and wheels. He demonstrated longer attention spans than at other toys and displayed his delight by laughing and remarking, “I like it … it goes round and round.” Because this instrument held Daniel’s attention, I began to offer him challenges of construction. When he was satisfied with his creations, we celebrated by taking pictures and displayed his work chronologically. I reviewed accumulated photos with parents and colleagues and we noticed the progression of Daniel’s labor. He gradually added details to his constructions using other materials and created increasingly larger structures. Also, I uncovered ideal opportunities to implement necessary language objectives of building vocabulary and increasing his use of prepositions. We began a “Gears and Wheels” project where other class members participated in constructing imaginary machinery. We added titles to our creations and photographed our cumulative projects. Daniel was an active participant and was considered the instigator of the investigation.

Vygotsky’s (1993) core ideas centered on the inclusion of all children. He believed that scaffolded learning occurrences, such as the aforementioned experience with Daniel, could help provide for individual needs within a “typically developing” environment. Vygotsky’s conviction in mainstreaming insisted that goals be the same for all children. The difference lies in the means to get to those goals, so alterations have to take place.

As a further example of Vygotsky’s belief, during one of our first projects of “discovering myself,” the students chose to document their physical attributes. Although class members explored various materials and accomplished creative self-portraits over a few weeks, I observed Daniel examining his own face in the mirror. Scaffolding techniques assisted Daniel toward achieving the desired goal (see Figure 1). At that time, I respected that his drawing was the extent of his project. I knew that I would return to it later in the year to observe for development. We concluded his preschool years with a final self-portrait and compared it to his first, almost 2 years later (see Figure 2). Through ongoing documentation, it was easy to observe Daniel’s growth in fine motor abilities, language, and understanding.

Gandini (1993) has identified the merits of documentation. Thoughtful recording of projects reveals how children grow and develop and illustrates to children that their work is valued. The collections establish the delight and progression of learning to be shared with those who are important in the child’s life.

**Conclusion**

Although today’s diverse classrooms present teachers with many challenges, it also provides great opportunities. The Reggio Emilia approach sheds light on what is meant by inclusion. The vision embraces children with special needs whereas teachers and parents share the child’s achievements. Because teachers can feel anxious, guiding children with special needs requires schools and parents to consider education as a collaborative
effort. The teacher’s role must encompass creating a welcoming environment where participation and communication are encouraged. As a result, school life and home life become extensions of each other where each is complemented.

Furthermore, by recognizing what is meaningful to the child, projects can be created and investigations can take place. The emphasis on abilities helps educators meet individual needs. According to Katz and Chard (2000), the project methodology does not have to bear the entire curriculum. Project work can complement many areas from academic learning to an individualized application of skills. As a result, an inclusive community is established as children and adults develop a deep understanding and respect for those who may be different from themselves. What has made a significant impact on this author is the natural course and holistic mind-set that radiate throughout this approach. There are no differences in practices for special needs children. As seen in the cases discussed, the image of the child remains the focal inspiration to all extensions of practice.

We can acquire great insight and inspiration from studying Reggio Emilia practices. Our attitudes can be expanded, commencing with our values, ethics, and beliefs about children. The challenges are as follows: Can we develop, along these guidelines, a way to deepen our respect for children and put it into our daily practice? Are we able to put aside exclusion and adapt to real inclusive practice? Can we apply the processes proposed by the Reggio Emilia approach to include all students in our classrooms? I invite others to join the call of adopting the beliefs of the Reggio Emilia approach and transmitting them into ongoing practice.

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