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Introduction

BEST PRACTICES IN early childhood education draw on old and new traditions. Some go back to John Dewey's ideas about learning through experience; others reflect Friedrich Froebel's understanding of the importance of play. Two sources of best practices come from Northern Italy—the work of Maria Montessori and the work of Loris Malaguzzi and the many educators who worked with him to develop what is known today as “the Reggio Approach.”

Drawing on these strong traditions, I have organized this book to describe 12 practices that, in my opinion, are essential, or in the word of the title, “best.” These practices include:

1. how we put what we believe about young children into practice;
2. how we help children become self-regulated;
3. ways to integrate the life of school and home by involving families;
4. how to structure time so that there is Open Flow, long uninterrupted periods in which children can concentrate on what interests them;
5. how to design a classroom environment that is interesting enough to provoke long, concentrated work;
6. how to hold Meaning-full Conversation, supported by a group of techniques I call a Conversation Tool Kit;
7. what it means to be an Intentional Teacher and what it looks like to teach with Intention;
8. what it means to use a multitude of materials and to introduce children to their attributes, functions, and histories;
9. how to introduce children to a plethora of things to do with materials from the natural and man-made environments;
10. how to develop evidence of children's growth through observing what they do and listening to what they say;
11. how to assess children by using the evidence of what they do and say as the way to see their growth;
12. how to engage children in projects that tap their interest, competence, and creativity and result in the production of Significant Work that is creative, complex, competent, language-full, and joyful.

These 12 practices are demonstrated, one per chapter in this book, with scenarios from classrooms, dialogues of children and teachers, and work samples showing the outcome of using each practice. Used together, the 12 best practices constitute a new structure for early education.

When I began to teach, I was 26 years old and the mother of a 4-year-old. I had just

earned a Montessori certificate in a 9-month/7-hour-a-day training course. Memories of my experiences from the ensuing 4 years with a class of 35 children in a Montessori school are vivid. Some are the foundation for beliefs I hold today about learning.

Rigorously schooled in Montessori practical life activities, I structured exercises to enable 3-year-olds to manage complex routines. So, I kept only six juice glasses, ensuring that glass washing would take place several times each morning. The activity was constrained: You could only have juice if there was a clean glass. Likewise, the fishbowl could only be changed once a day. One morning, an urgent chorus of voices interrupted the lesson I was giving: “Mrs. Lewin! Quick! Come!” There on the table, the goldfish was flapping and gasping. The child changing the water had missed his target. Water was everywhere, a matter of no concern, but the fish seemed about to perish. I grasped it and put it in the little water remaining in the fishbowl. The fish revived. A child brought a bucket, another a mop, a third a sponge, and all helped the child who had spilled the water to clean up.

The episode showed that children have empathy for living creatures and for one another; that they can follow complex procedures—even ones fraught with peril, take “failure” in stride and recover, and spontaneously help one another. Daily, I saw how critical the years before 6 are for language learning (confirmed by today’s research in neuroscience), how aware young children are of one another’s emotions and competence, and how important structure is.

I was subsequently hired to introduce Montessori methods in what was then called a “play school.” Neither the director nor teachers had any desire to learn about Montessori, but with a grant from a wealthy parent to “introduce” the Montessori method, they had to do something. The staff held a then-common belief that the Montessori method was somehow wrong, that showing a child how to do something would destroy creativity.

My memories from that school are of a free-for-all—painting with shaving cream, which the children gleefully squirted all over one another; “creative snacks,” which meant grabbing spaghetti from the large bowl and using your hands to smush it into the table; leaving toys in disarray; no morning meeting or other structure. The teachers called everything “creative.” The only evidence that the teachers felt anything was amiss was their exhaustion at morning’s end.

As years passed, the split between structure and creativity in early education widened. This book is grounded on my belief that structure is essential and my concern that it is difficult but possible in early childhood classrooms to establish a structure in which children simultaneously build self-regulation and skills, *and* express creativity. I have spent my life striving to create foundations for educational practices that are worthy of children’s competence and joyful nature.

CHANGING PRACTICES

In 1984, I first heard about the Reggio Approach, the short name that refers to early education in the Municipal Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Only after founding the Model Early Learning Center (MELC) in 1988, and flailing and all but failing to make it a model, did I conclude, in 1992, that we should adapt the Reggio philosophy and practices.

The Reggio Approach evolved under the leadership of Loris Malaguzzi (1920–1994), founder of the schools and a driving impresario. With strong parent involvement and a cadre of educators who agreed with his vision, they created schools in which children’s

rights were deeply respected and children's responsibility was built along with the rights. If you know anything about the Reggio Approach, you understand its attraction: Classrooms are aesthetic, children's work is sophisticated, parent involvement is high. The Reggio Approach is truly a new and visionary picture of school before grade school.

A few American educators became interested in the Reggio schools in the 1980s, but I place the serious start of American interest in 1990, the first year that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) scheduled a presentation on Reggio at its annual conference. The room held 30 people; 100 showed up.

Today, most early educators have heard the word *Reggio*, about half know it refers to Reggio Emilia, a city in Northern Italy, and about 1,200 American schools use the word in their name or mission statement to show that they are inspired to try to emulate Reggio practices. U.S. interest was boosted by a 1991 article in *Newsweek* that stated Reggio Emilia had the "world's best preschools" (Kantowitz & Wingert, pp. 50–52).

What makes a "best" school is a cluster of "best practices"—those things that teachers do to prepare interest-laden environments, to help children become self-regulated, and to foster the drive to learn that is a human's birthright. The practices that are the foundation for Reggio work are the same that underlie any best early education practices. Thus, whether you desire to use the Reggio Approach or to align your teaching with best practices, this book will give you the foundation.

There are strong similarities and significant differences between the Reggio Approach and the Montessori method, another example of a "best practice": Briefly, both respect young children's enormous competence and rely on intentional teaching, on a well-prepared environment that children learn to manage responsibly, and on children being self-regulated, choosing activities based on their interests, and concentrating for long periods. They differ in the role of the teacher—Montessori teachers are lone practitioners, the aide usually not acting in a teaching role. Typically, Montessori teachers introduce materials and then, for the most part, step aside and let the children use the materials as they have been presented. In Reggio classrooms, there is no aide and the adults are co-equals. Reggio teachers collaborate with children and intervene regularly as they make suggestions and work alongside children.

Montessori and Reggio use different materials: Montessori uses beautifully designed and comprehensive sets of diverse apparatus to teach sensory, language, math concepts, and much more. The objective for each material is carefully spelled out. Reggio uses a wealth of natural and man-made materials to encourage children to collaborate on complex tasks with outcomes that emerge as the tasks progress.

The differences stem from the underlying theories of the two systems: Jean Piaget's (1950) idea, that intelligence unfolds naturally in stages with no adult intervention, supports the Montessori method. Lev Vygotsky's (1934/1986) idea, that adult intervention is essential in learning, is the cornerstone of Reggio practices.

As a teacher, I lived the daily rhythm of classroom life. Then, as founder/director of schools and of one of the first hands-on children's museums, I experienced the devilish process of change. When children's museums began, they threatened many museum professionals who insisted that these "hands-on" places were not museums. When I founded two junior high schools, public school educators perceived them as a threat.

Because of these experiences, I recognize the hopes, fears, frustrations, and successes of educators whose vision lies on the fringe of our culture, as Reggio practices do. In this book, I try to allay those fears and frustrations through stories, key points, and questions about the foundations for Reggio or any other best early education practices.

After hearing an inspiring lecture on the Reggio Approach, seeing an exciting PowerPoint presentation, or visiting a dynamic classroom, teachers' spirits are high. But they falter when facing "What to Do on Monday." There is no one entry to the process of change. Changing teaching practices is not like first removing, then protecting the furniture before painting the living room. Classroom life is complex, and teachers begin in different ways to question what they are doing, to harness their individual strengths, and to make changes. Change can happen in a sudden fit of ripping everything commercial off the walls, but usually begins gradually—the toe-dipping I know so well as a non-swimmer who is afraid of the water.

In this book, I try to speak to both "rippers" and "dippers." I use real classroom stories to show teachers' doubts, confusion, eventual attempts, and successes so that you see the thoughts behind their actions. Thus, the book is like a mental rehearsal of what you might want to try in your own classroom. The practices I have included address the "sticky" places—those aspects of teaching that are new, unclear, or contradictory to mainstream early education in the United States.

As I reflect on many classroom observations and workshop audiences' questions, I am struck by how far American interest in Reggio has spread, by the similarities in where teachers get stuck, and by a common misinterpretation that the Reggio emphasis on children's choice denotes a laissez-faire approach. This is as strong a misconception as is the notion that there is no creativity in the Montessori method.

Each of the powerful practices I present is a plank in the structure that supports any best early education system. All the practices are essential before children can do the kinds of stellar work we see in Reggio schools or the concentrated effort at hard work we see in Montessori schools.

THE BOOK'S CONTENT

This book is not formulaic and has no preconceived scripts. Rather, scenarios highlight children's and teachers' competence. For example, in Chapter 2 on self-regulation, you see teachers who turn children's unsettled or chaotic behavior into focused activity. In Chapter 4 on an Open Flow day, you see how teachers establish a structure in which children can choose from a mass of provocative materials and use them for an extended time. In Chapter 6 on conversation, you sit in on teacher/child exchanges and learn why some are and others are not conversations.

This book expands my earlier writing so that teachers can see (1) the foundations for practicing the Reggio Approach and (2) how to put them in place in a classroom. For example, buried in a paragraph in my book *Possible Schools* (2006) are 24 words describing a project called Our Families and Us that provided the impetus for the MELC's parent program. Here, that project is presented in a full chapter (Chapter 3) about involving families in a school.

I have built the book in response to educators' questions. The Director of a large cluster of early childhood centers said, "Educators from our community went to Reggio, we have explained its wonder to our colleagues, we have held discussion groups among ourselves. It's time to stop saying, 'This is complex.' It is time for us to *get down to business and do something!*"

I avoid calling the Reggio Approach "complex," "subtle," and "difficult," but in this book I show teachers' minute-by-minute decisions—selecting children and considering

topics for projects, determining how long projects should last, or how to segue from project to project. You cannot see the structure in a Reggio day as you can in a scheduled day; thus, Reggio classrooms are often mistaken as *laissez-faire*, on one end of a continuum with “readiness” at the opposite end, where skills are drilled for kindergarten or 1st grade. There is nothing *laissez-faire* about Reggio teaching! Expectations are clear and enormous emphasis is placed on skill development.

I believe that the structure and practices that form the foundation of the Reggio Approach can be learned. This book is a tool to

- examine beliefs about children and teaching—Chapter 1;
- build self-regulation in children—Chapter 2;
- engage children in the process of drawing their families into a school’s daily life—Chapter 3;
- structure and manage Open Flow, a long daily period during which children can focus without interruption—Chapter 4;
- design classrooms so children’s interests replace lessons from Teacher’s Guides as the driving force—Chapter 5;
- hold “meaning-full” conversations with children—Chapter 6;
- learn to be an intentional teacher—Chapter 7;
- understand the multiple roles of materials—Chapters 8 and 9;
- document children’s activities—Chapter 10;
- use authentic assessment to show children’s progress—Chapter 11;
- undertake projects—Chapter 12.

Throughout, I identify key points, and at the end of chapters, I pose questions to help you think more deeply about the content. To conclude the book, Chapter 13 provides a self-assessment tool. Structured around the acronym EXCEL, questions are grouped in five areas—Environment, eXchanges, Conversation, Evidence, and Language—to assist you in examining your practices and those of your school. Answers indicate your facility with or readiness to engage in best practices. If you use EXCEL to assess your practices before reading the book, then adopt some of the practices and again use EXCEL, you will see your own growth. The potential of this book lies in its use as a catalyst for changing teaching practices.

Best practices are compatible with findings from the new science of teaching/learning and recent research on the brain, and I show where theory and practice intersect. The research with the most impact on this book is Michael Posner’s work on attention (Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, & Kieras, 2008). Posner’s work established the neurological basis for children’s self-regulation, a theme that runs throughout this book.

The fact is, certain practices must be in place in order to do Reggio-inspired or any other work that is “best.” The beliefs and techniques that I explain provide a foundation for any early education that exemplifies best practices. Hallmarks of such practices, which form the backbone of this book, include

- silencing the impulse to “teach” in favor of listening and observing;
- intervening in children’s activities with intention;
- working one-on-one or with a small group while most of the other children work independently;

- encouraging collaboration among children, between teachers and children, teacher to teacher as peers, and school and family;
- admitting frustration or failure and asking colleagues for help;
- looking reflectively at every aspect of the classroom.

Most essential is what you believe about children. Reggio educators believe in children's competence, their right to an aesthetic and thoughtfully prepared classroom, and to teachers who are enthusiastic, joyful, avid learners and astute listeners.

BREACHING THE REGGIO/U.S. DIVIDE

The Italian and American cultures are dramatically different, as is each country's history of early education. In Reggio Emilia, high value is placed on aesthetics, philosophy, and intellectuality. American culture values the newest "thing," commercial production, quick solutions, and sound-bite analysis (an oxymoron!).

Reggio practices have been evolving for 65 years. Current U.S. early education is evolving in an era when the need for out-of-home care in children's earliest years has exploded. New standards that have been developed over the short period of the past decade pay more attention to judging children against predetermined measures of "readiness" than to fulfilling each child's potential. A difference with great consequences for American classrooms is that English is only 40 to 60% phonetic but the Italian language is over 95% phonetic. Therefore, unlike American teachers, Reggio teachers are not pressured to teach phonics before 1st grade.

Those Americans trying to use Reggio practices are to be saluted for an effort that requires them to go against the grain of our culture. This is perhaps most evident when we look at the watchword of Reggio education: "Joy!" I hope that children's joy is evident in this book, that it is contagious, and that it surrounds the practices I advocate.