



a child of rights

The Reggio Emilia municipal school model

Jay Hutchins interviews **Will Parnell** about early childhood development.

Will Parnell is the pedagogical director and professor of education at the Helen Gordon Center, Portland State University's full-day laboratory school for children aged 4 months through kindergarten. The center's approach is inspired by the educational model of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

US educators have increasingly turned their attention to other nations' policies and practices to inform deliberations about American childcare and early education. The internationally recognized municipal early childhood schools in Reggio Emilia support and challenge many educators' notions of appropriate early education. For 25 years, this affluent northern Italian community has committed 12 percent of the town budget to provide high-quality care for children 6 and younger. Today, the community boasts 22 pre-primary schools and 14 infant-toddler centers serving about half of the city's children in this age group.

Sockeye: Your approach at the Helen Gordon Center seems to have an innovative set of ideas about early childhood development and learning.

WP: Yes, we have a unique way of looking at the young child. Contrary to many approaches to early childhood education, we do not seek a linear way to get a result. Unfortunately, that is inevitably what academia tends to do, and many theories of childhood learning are developed by academics, such as myself.

Sockeye: Your approach at the Helen Gordon Center is to engage children in creating their own learning process?

WP: The emphasis at Helen Gordon is to shift the image of the child in society. We explore the image we hold of the child, both the child's image of herself and the image held by parents, policy-makers, and teachers. Our approach assumes that education is political. We address this reality by making the teachers co-learners with the children, and by allowing children the latitude to place themselves in the community from their perspective.

Sockeye: Sockeye is very interested in the policy aspect of early childhood development. How can your approach help develop policy in education?

WP: The needs of the child are determined by the adults in our society, and in the political arena the child is conceptualized as a needy subject rather than a member of society, rather than a co-participating citizen, rather than as 'a child of rights,' as Carla Rinaldi would say.

[Rinaldi is director of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools, and the executive consultant for Reggio Children in Italy, a mixed public-private company that the Municipality of Reggio Emilia established in 1994 to manage the pedagogical and cultural

exchange initiatives that had already been taking place for many years between the municipal early childhood services and a large number of teachers and researchers from all over the world.]

Many of our ideas at Helen Gordon are based on the approach taken by the municipal school system in Reggio Emilia, Italy, where they ask, "Where is the child in society? How do they contribute? What are the rights of the child?" The idea that a child has rights is paramount and is shared with the children. Among other things, children are asked to think about their place and standing in the community and what rights the community should provide them.

Sockeye: Is there a definable model guiding instruction in Reggio Emilia?

WP: It's not seen as a model and teachers are not considered to have reached a pinnacle of learning, they are not the ultimate authority. They learn how to teach as they teach the children. In our approach, a child's awareness of his or her own development is considered an essential part of their learning experience. The parents are involved with this process as well.

Sockeye: How is instruction given?

WP: Here is an example. The child is asked to explain his or her ideas about how something works such as, "Where do shadows come from?" The teacher may explain to a student that there are different ways of believing about how shadows work. They will then help the student develop a way to test his or her own ideas, to create a new theory. The idea is to build knowledge so that children construct it internally through experience and then also understand how to do this. The same process informs the teachers in their work.

Sockeye: I understand that in Reggio Emilia there are no teacher manuals, curriculum guides, or achievement tests.

WP: The lack of externally-imposed mandates makes it essential that teachers become skilled observers of children. This idea informs the whole process. A teacher might lead a classroom experience by asking questions, keenly observing, jotting down notes, even recording conversations between children. The idea here is to understand and expand on the children's spontaneous learning-play.

As the children and parents participate in and gain an understanding of this process of learning, they develop what academics call meta-cognition, which is essentially an awareness of their own thinking, their learning process. Teachers utilize this awareness in their approach to teaching.

Sockeye: Please give me an example of this in action.

WP: At Helen Gordon, on a trip to a museum, we will document the whole event using digital photography. Then teachers, students, and parents will review the photos of themselves and each other reacting to the exhibits, the staff, and each other, recalling many reactions they have forgotten, what they thought or felt. Not only the exhibits are remembered but the experiences of self and others are discussed. We also talk about the learning that we think takes place.

Sockeye: So this learning process is collaborative and self-reflective?

WP: Yes, the teacher is not teaching from a stage. The young child and the parents are part of a truly creative learning process. In Reggio Emilia, the

approach includes the concept of the importance of the environment in development of the child, and the use of long-term projects with small groups of children is the major curriculum strategy. Each classroom has a mini-atelier in it. This is a studio for visual, representative and creative arts, drama and other modes of expression with a beautifully arranged inventory of materials used in constructing projects.

Each school also has an atelierista, which is the Italian term for a teacher specializing in visual representation but with a variety of academic backgrounds such as engineering, design, creative arts, drama, or mathematics. The atelierista works with classroom teachers in curriculum development, the way the school looks, and documentation of the work of the students.

Sockeye: How are the schools organized? Are they structured? Is there an organizational chart?

WP: In Reggio, there is no principal, and no hierarchical relationship among the teachers. Teachers have stayed together in teams for as long as 30 years and children from the neighborhoods come to their local school. So there is a familiarity that characterizes the relationships among adults and children. A pedagogical coordinator connects every three schools and helps the teacher, the atelierista, and parents of a school make sense of the curriculum. The municipal schools are located all over the city and open to all children. The first children to enter the schools are children with special rights, those who are termed here as children with special needs.

Sockeye: Please give me a specific example of how this co-creative learning is implemented.

WP: I can give you a very simple example. In most schools, young children are given fat crayons to learn to draw pictures. The assumption behind doing this

is that children are not capable of doing fine work or work that requires the preciseness of fine instruments.

At the Helen Gordon Center and in Reggio Emilia, children are believed to be creative and intelligent, and are given the same material adults use in the creative process. We try to provide children with sophisticated materials and tools for creative expression because we believe they are truly creative and that creation can help them represent their thoughts. Fat crayons or large, round paintbrushes and markers will never allow children to express themselves with subtlety.

Sockeye: How does the use of expensive paintbrushes allow students to develop a sense of their rights or their identity in the community?

WP: The point is that if we do not ask children to be aware of their own thinking and feelings, how sophisticated can their thinking become? The same applies to the use of fat crayons or marking pens. If we ask them to express themselves only using the most unsophisticated materials how can they see themselves as having standing in the world of sophisticated ideas or in a society built on ideas? How can they fully and authentically represent their thoughts?

Sockeye: Don't you have to have some awareness of when these children are ready to engage in introspection? Some people believe young children are not ready to intellectualize their experiences.

WP: Actually, we just make it part of the socialization process. Self-awareness increases understanding and communication, even in small increments. As I mentioned, the political arena does not have the child's view in it. We see the child as someone who should have rights and a positive and thoughtful view of themselves in the political arena ... in any setting.

Sockeye: I remember thinking that one has to be self-aware to agree to disagree. One thing I wonder about is the ability of children to contextualize things within a creative thinking process before they have enough information. What about phonics and multiplication tables and basic historical facts or scientific concepts?

WP: In Reggio, they are careful to distinguish what teachers in academia call constructivism and direct instruction. However, they mix instruction techniques very thoughtfully. There is direct instruction of factual material and technique as in the use of the fine-tipped paintbrushes or helping children understand that if they move their hands a certain way it manipulates the materials differently. Sometimes this knowledge is transmitted teacher-to-child, but mostly I understand that they are careful to plan for a child-to-child effect within smaller project groups of children.

But the tendency is to encourage the children to uniquely express themselves with paint, clay, dance, drama play, carving and words. We see expression in all these things as a form of language and understanding that is developed internally. These multiple ways of expression are collectively referred to as symbolic language. In the Reggio pre-primary schools and at Helen Gordon, we esteem creative expression in young children, because we think its symbolic language helps to represent thinking.

Sockeye: It's clear that you don't just let kids play with paint but discuss and examine the whole process of a project from many perspectives.

WP: That is true. There is a faith in parents, teachers, and children to contribute in meaningful ways to the children's experiences and purposes in the schools while also allowing the children to contribute.

We actually do not tout the children's work as art, instead we liken it to representative thinking. This view can require more sophisticated skill than solely relying on creative expression. Children consider the relationships between what they study and what they strive to represent. And teachers encourage debates among students about a child's work. Revision of drawings and ideas is encouraged, and teachers allow children to repeat activities and even modify each other's work to get a better understanding of a topic.

Sockeye: What is the upshot of this method of teaching? I want there to be longitudinal studies indicating extraordinary measures of success.

WP: Well, how I want to answer this question is to say that when I asked it, I was told that only the Germans and the Americans ask this question.

That is one answer.

Another is that in Reggio, they are not looking for specific outcomes. What is important is being in the present and understanding that the child can create his or her own understanding.

I also believe that evaluation cannot simply come from the teacher's worldview. The teachers have to see the child and see themselves. Documenting learning cannot be done on one's own, it has to be done in collaboration with others.

Sockeye: You have nothing in the way of data?

WP: Ok, for 3 years, we had over 20 different public school teachers come and speak and they all say that they know the

Helen Gordon Center children. They can spot them teaching other children about social skills, naturally leading in the first days of the school year, and already reading or writing beyond their years.

Sockeye: How does all this create a community?

WP: Ok, does it make sense to give children plastic toys or to give them materials from which they can imagine their own toys ... they are certainly capable. As they grow, they are also capable of creating a community and the ideas that sustain it. That is exactly what happened in Reggio after the war. Women began to construct schools out of the rubble left in the war's aftermath. They created a place for the children to learn and play. Up until then, the Catholic Church controlled most education in Italy. The school system created by these women eventually was supported by the municipality.

Sockeye: What about the tensions we have here in the Northwest between beliefs about evolution and religion and the best way to teach children? How polarized are people in Reggio regarding education?

WP: You know, in Italy I have noticed that people do not take such discussions so personally. There seems to be less at stake for losing or winning these kinds of arguments and they are not embedded in the public policy decision-making process. It is understood that the political arena really does not hold the child's view. I would like to see our community

evolve its view of the child and make a space for children to grow that is less polarized.

Sockeye: If there are no outcomes to be measured, why do people want to replicate this system?

WP: People in Reggio want the experience of the children to be unique ... and locally situated. They are not really concerned with replicating it. Others in the United States have tried to imitate Reggio's approach, look, style, or thinking. I think it is an impossible task, but some manage really well to recreate themselves with similar dialogue, documentation techniques, and philosophies on childhood. We caution against replication or a franchise model and, instead, challenge ourselves and others to become our best selves. However, our dialogue with educators in Reggio has led us to some new practices, as I'm sure it has done the same for them. I believe this was one hope of Loris Malaguzzi, a founder of the municipal schools in Reggio.

Sockeye: Final words?

I see the child as someone who should have rights and a positive, even a proactive view of their and others' lives, one that eventually will influence the political arena. This engagement of the child is what is being created in Reggio, this is what we try to do at the Helen Gordon Center, too.

Sockeye: Thanks Will. 

[An organization called Reggio Children has created dialogue by allowing 40,000 study tour participants from more than 80 different countries to visit their schools. One school touched by this collaboration is the 35-year-old Helen Gordon Child Development Center, Portland State University's full-day laboratory preprimary school for children aged 4 months through kindergarten. The school primarily provides education for children of students, faculty and staff members of Portland State University, and also serves the local community in a laboratory role. Approximately 175 children attend daily, and more than 200 families participate in the center's program. The program is inspired by many approaches to teaching and learning, most notably anti-bias education principles, and the ongoing and rich dialogue with educators from Reggio Emilia, Italy about sound practices in early education - Will Parnell]