

1-1-2012

## Investigating the Reggio Emilia Study Tour Experience: From Conversation to Insights

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### Citation Details

Parnell, W. (2012). Investigating the Reggio Emilia study tour experience: From conversation to insights. *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*, 14(1), 1-18.

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An On-line Journal  
for Teacher Research

## Investigating the Reggio Emilia Study Tour Experience: From Conversation to Insights

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Taking early childhood Master's students on a Reggio Emilia Study Tour leads to making meaning of anticipatory and after-experience reflective narrative-episodes. These narrative episodes are constructed around the phenomena of anticipating the trip as well as reflecting on the experiences during and after the study tour. The experiences are then analyzed collaboratively among researchers and participants through informal discussions.

Themes in each narrative episode are explored through the written narratives and then conclusions are drawn. Anticipatory themes include eagerness to see, desire to witness the image of the child in the everyday, and a concern about adopting the Reggio approach in the U.S.; and, wanting to understand documentation processes and feeling a sense of time and space in the environments. After-experience reflections bring about themes such as change as a constant reminder of humanness and barriers in language and translation; and, questioning practices at home and constructing understanding/articulating differences as reconciliation. In the conclusion, questions linger about stretching ourselves, going on the journey as learners, and finding the in-between moments. We also find new frameworks of mind where believing and seeing in new ways lead us to not "do Reggio" and instead develop our own living organism and dynamic programs as the joy in a lifetime of work approach. In the end, finding the extraordinary in the everyday emerges as an implication for future research.

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### Introduction, Problem & Purpose

As an educator, imagine arriving home from a trip to Reggio Emilia, Italy to a number of folks anxiously awaiting your return. Your friends, family and colleagues are around you asking with baited breath, "Well, what was it like for your students and you?" and "What did you learn, see, do, feel, and experience with them in Reggio Emilia?" Would you be able to respond with your stories without embellishing or romanticizing them? How do we tell about something without being too rigid, literal or fanciful?

Most importantly, what narrative-episodes can our students tell of when we return from a *Student and Professor Study Tour*? Can they share their explorations, no matter what they have been? Why

and how could these be important to other teacher educators and students alike? As teacher educators who work with developing teachers, we aim to address these questions.

Primarily, we find that a majority of U.S. early childhood educators in education programs hear about the principles and practices of education in the Municipal Preprimary Schools and Infant-Toddler Centers of Reggio Emilia, Italy. However, they typically cannot afford the monetary expenses and time commitments to actually fly thousands of miles away and attend the study tours themselves. Through the research of Master's students and teacher educators turned researcher-participants and witnesses of the study tour experiences, we aim to share our Master's students' experiences as

captured-thoughts and narrative episodes. Before we can thread these experiences, we wish to explore the related research literature and disclose our methods to demonstrate our unique points of view in coming to our research work. We never anticipate being *just another set of stories* about Reggio Emilia and hope to inspire others to want to study young children in their own contexts and around the world.

## Why Share Stories, Experiences and the Narrative?

“I look for the forms  
things want to come as  
from what black well of possibility,  
how a thing will  
unfold:  
not the space on paper – though  
that, too – but the  
uninterfering means on paper”  
(Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 66).

As teacher educators leading a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction emphasizing early childhood education, this notion of “uninterfering means on paper” makes us reflect on how we could more carefully share our student teachers’ professional development experiences and help us more fully understand the experiences they capture on paper. Often times, we hear that students feel their words and work are decontextualized. They document their learning journey and others—students, professors and others in their world—borrow their ideas taking them in unfamiliar directions, sometimes missing the original intention or simply ignoring them altogether.

While many of our master’s students travel with us to study an approach profoundly inspiring our faculty, program and lab-school, many more students do not take the journey. Often, upon our return, student travelers feel unable to tell of their experiences. Tongue-tied, they feel silenced to express the weight of their immersive overseas involvements. With this challenge to share more authentically from the perspectives of the students themselves, we begin to ask ourselves how important the written-down experiences of those who go on to study the Reggio Emilia approach really are. Why would we dare to share such

experiences, making visible and valued the perspectives of the student? With these questions in mind, we turn to Abbot and Nutbrown (2001) who declare:

Experiencing Reggio Emilia’s provision for young children offers wonderful practical ideas... These deeply held beliefs [demonstrated in Reggio Emilia] make one ask questions, require deep thought, inner interrogation about what we think, what we believe, and how those thoughts and beliefs are manifest in our work with and for young children. That quality, that capacity to provoke, is perhaps one of the greatest and lasting legacies of any personal encounter with the Reggio Emilia experience.” (p. 2)

Personal encounters retold can and do inform a teacher’s way with children. For teachers, this can mean describing a memory as a way to examine and retool teaching practices. We share these ideas with the students as we prepare them (and ourselves) for the study tour and ask them to participate with us in our research study by formally reviewing and agreeing to our human subjects’ reviewed letters as outlined by our university inter-institutional ethical research review board.

As we keep exploring the literature with our students and journey in mind, we find Jalongo and Isenberg (1995) who state, “Narrative itself speaks to practitioners” (p. xviii). We believe that through the narration of experiences, the meaning of our ideas can speak to others and aid in the transformation of teachers’ thinking and practices. The students are hopeful that our narrative project can provide them opportunities to tell of their anticipation experiences and the longing to live in company with the Reggio way as well as reflection on their experiences once they return home. The students aspire to have their narrative expressions speak to their peers, colleagues, community and early childhood educators as much as we desire this to occur based on our research together.

Moreover, Ayers (2001) poignantly adds to our way of thinking about the meaning of ideas speaking to others and shows us the limitations we may encounter within teaching and learning programs if we do not share the serious encounters.

To begin with, most of us attend colleges or preparation programs that neither acknowledge nor honor our larger and deeper purposes—places that turn our attention to research on teaching or methods of teaching and away from a serious encounter with the reality of teaching, the art and craft of teaching, the morality of teaching, or the ecology of childhood. Our love of children, our idealism, is made to seem quaint in these places (p. 8).

Taking from Ayers thoughts, we think our students' narrative-episodes of the study tour experiences can become a springboard into action and a way to keep teachers motivated and moving along to better places in their practice. Rather than keeping at bay what is real in the narrative-experiences, we hope to bring the experiences alive through *mindful* retelling and reflexive reliving (van Manen, 1990). As we see it, narrating and reflecting on stories tend to keep the teacher moving away from the quaint places and toward the meaning of their own experiences, heavily laden with one's own values and ideologies. Such values and ideologies propel teachers into their larger and deeper purposes in teaching and learning.

Ayers (2001) helps us to believe that to witness other ways of teaching and learning is paramount to shaking up and/or validating a teacher's beliefs and practice. As teacher educators, we aim to validate high-quality teaching and learning experiences and to move students to enliven their action, research and teaching practices in new, innovative and inspiring ways.

Early childhood teacher research as shaped by Stremmel (2007), Meier and Stremmel (2010), and MacNaughton and Hughes (2008) is crucial to our Master's program, the faculty, student thinking and practices. All students complete an action research project where they determine a problem, purpose and question to study in action, conduct a literature review, determine their approach, collect and interpret data and reflect conclusions. We maintain that this research is everyday focused and requires the teacher to reflect before, on and in action (Schön, 1983).

Our students learn to build a narrative between what they see, what they read, what they have already known and how they could proceed ahead in their learning and teaching. This framework is rooted in Dewey's (1933) thinking. As well, action research and narrative inquiry have common research connections, focusing on change (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

In our experience, taking students on the Reggio study tour and asking them to reflect their learning in narratives tends to lead to more mindful considerations in their subsequent action research projects. The deeply rooted questions surface as our students engage the study-tour learning and immerse themselves in the dynamic differences encountered on the intense and dense trip.

This practice of sharing the narrative experiences of those visiting Reggio Emilia is not to solidify *a* way or *the* way of teaching in schools, but rather to show the complexity and multiplicity of ways of doing and being with young children. Fasano's (2002) movie *Not Just Anyplace* suggests that "Malaguzzi's declaration of ignorance" means the more we know, the more we can declare our ignorance in knowing *the* way. A founder of the Reggio Preprimary Schools and Infant-Toddler Centers, Malaguzzi also tells us we should know our theories on childhood but keep an ever-widening eye to the children and practice themselves, as they will change our minds and make us see in new ways. This concept illuminates the question, how can *our* experiences of a Reggio Emilia study tour help us and others see in new ways while maintaining the essences of experiences intact?

## How Do We Gather up Narratives?

As researchers and teacher educators, we give ourselves a complicated task to redirect the *sayings, thoughts, and anecdotes* of our Master's students into an amalgamation of coherent streams of consciousness (connecting thoughts and actions to portray a point of view), so that others can make meaning of them. First, we consider the design of this research, then set up our tools and questions, and finally, we share our methodological choices for analyzing the data.

## Design

As Wright (2000) points out, “Not only do the élites in the early childhood industry ‘Disneyfy’ our practice for us – but when we attempt to speak, they take the words from our mouths” (p. 225). We have labored hard not to “take the words” but to allow teachers’ meanings of their experiences to stand on their own. We made a conscious choice to leave large portions of the teachers’ narratives intact rather than consider certain words or phrases out of context. This may lead others to wonder if leaving sections of the narrative-episodes intact in this manuscript was necessary, as it requires patience and determination to read through them. Our choice is deliberate so as not to “Disneyfy” or decontextualize the voices of the students. We take a stand by preparing our readers’ audience for what is offered by these students. It is only through the context of narrated episodes that we find meaning in our reflective discussions that intertwine among each set of narrations.

This research is phenomenological by nature of our questions and resides in the interpretivist traditions of phenomenology “that gives priority to the meaning individuals make of their experiences” (Sumsion, 2002, p. 2). Phenomenology is concerned with the meaning in the experiences and the reflexive reliving of the experiences (van Manen, 1990). In this approach, we wish to concertedly give credit to those who bore witness and shared their carefully considered narrative-episodes, both during the phenomena of anticipation and reflection. Their narrated-episodes are experiences arising out of a collaborative effort to share stories and make meaning in learning endeavors.

We find ourselves agreeing with Jalongo and Isenberg (1995), “Our goal is to abandon rather than contribute to superficial accounts that undermine or trivialize teaching. We seek to encourage more reflective practice and to show rather than tell teachers just how this can be achieved” (p. xviii). We also hope *to show* our students’ experience by exposing critical phenomena of living in the life-world (van Manen, 1990). Preskill and Jacobvitz (2001) add to this notion of narrating critical phenomenon, “Researchers and teacher educators are giving new prominence to biography in the

preparation of teachers. They are discovering that the emerging identities and life histories of prospective teachers greatly influence the professional development of teachers—from the decision to teach, to the process of becoming a teacher, to the act of teaching itself” (p. 3). We want to encourage reflection and merge identity and life history of the students so that the students create their praxis. We define praxis as putting reflection into action while at the cross-roads of learning something new. We hope that the students would share these anticipation and post-experience reflections to inspire others into their own inspired (higher-good) teaching practice.

## How Do We Provoke Narrative Streams?

Before we went to visit the Reggio schools and after we gained consent from our student-participants, we sent out an email questionnaire to encourage the students’ narrative-episode writing, share their life and teaching experiences and begin to reflect back on their thinking in written words. Students were not responsible for answering the particular set of questions we sent, however, suggested considerations included: 1. Describe your background and understanding of Reggio Emilia principles and practices for teachers. 2. What do you hope to learn in Reggio? 3. What will be the focus of your learning during the Reggio study tour? And, 4. What burning questions do you have in regards to the schools of Reggio Emilia?

During the trip, we asked students to keep a journal and record what they saw, experienced, and learned about being in the schools and at the seminar events. We also met one evening and had an impromptu discussion at a restaurant. Some of these experiences were captured on a digital recorder and await transcription and analysis to be explored in future research writings.

After the trip, we asked students to write reflections about their experiences based loosely on the following questions. In order to keep a spirit of creativity in the writing process, these questions were only suggested: 1. What new knowledge did you gain, and why was it meaningful? 2. What left you puzzled and wanting to learn more? 3. Were there any theories or practices that you disagreed with, if so why? And, 4. What was the hardest thing to understand and why? We had the students come

together during our final class period to read, discuss and analyze their final reflections. We captured this final collaborative experience in our writing during the class period and plan to analyze those written documents in future publications.

### Data Discussions

Meaning in the lived experience was collaboratively sought before, during, and after the visits by the participants (Master's students and teacher-educators) as they talked through their stories. "In phenomenological research the emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience. The point of phenomenological research is to 'borrow' other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62). This shared meaning-making research created an arduous and thought provoking phenomenological research analysis process.

We focused on four experiences—two anticipations and two reflections—to determine their value, by asking what core experiences existed inside of the phenomenon. During our collaboration, opportunities for examining the clarity of each narrative (developing a strong relationship between the meaning in the story and the text used to describe the story) became essential as the participants read each other's texts.

The four narratives were segmented into various categories of "incidental and essential themes" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 106) and examined by the participants to make meaning of the experiences retold. "Phenomenological themes are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 90). The essential themes (knots in the experience web) such as "eagerness to see as a way into knowing" and "gaining a sense of time and space" are explored in the analysis and discussion to express the knotted up experience in the narrative episode. Knots seemed to be sticking points in our discussions of the narratives; the ideas that surfaced and stayed with our discussions as we analyzed the narrative.

An analysis and discussion is made of essential themes as "knots in the web of experiences", "points of meaning" or "fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated" (van Manen, 1990). As Friesen (2006) states, "The methodological value of the theme is not in providing some deep explanation in its own right, but in supplying a ground on which human science research can begin to explore an aspect of lived experience more fully – themes focus questioning around an experience rather than closing it off with answers." Questions arose from the themes that led us to wondering, rather than closing us in on *a particular way* of knowing *the* meaning of each experience. Further, Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nyström, (2008) have explored a potential post-phenomenological perspective (Vagle, 2009) in moving out beyond interpretivist or descriptive phenomenology processes. They suggest an alternative, or reconceptualized, analysis tool of *bridling the experience* "to actively wait for the phenomenon and its meanings to show themselves." This was done by reflecting on the pre-understanding of the phenomenon before engaging with the texts together as co-researchers and participants. As Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003) frame it, "Not to take the indefinite as definite." Our analysis process allowed us to reposition our impressions and find meaning in the narrative episodes put forward by the two Master's students who participated in our research study. Their pseudonyms are N.P and M.J.

For the purposes of this research, we hoped to share two specific narrative-episodes from before the trip (anticipatory narratives) and two after the trip (reflective narratives). These narrative-episodes were created by the students based on their before and after thoughts, experiences, and meanings as thoughtful, reflective, and learning teacher-researchers. These four narratives are exemplary of an appreciative inquiry and our power of asking *why share in the experiences* of students who attend the Reggio study tour.

### Data and Discussions

N.P. and M.J. are two students in our Master's degree program in early childhood education. One teaches in a corporate child care setting and the other directs and teaches in a high school child

development laboratory program. The teacher educators participating in this research journey taught in several ways in our community. One was an assistant professor of early childhood education and pedagogical director of the university lab-school at a local university who led the expedition and wrote this paper. Another teacher educator was a coordinator of early childhood pre-service education at another local college. The third teacher educator was a private school arts and sciences elementary principal who had been a principal in a public school for 25 years. These three teacher educators and longtime friends were interested in N.P. and M.J.'s experiences, thoughts, reactions, and ideas written in their reflective journals before, during and after the study tour. What follows is an analysis and discussion of the students' experiences.

### **Anticipation- N.P.'s Story and Discussion**

An analysis of N.P.'s experience demonstrates three essential themes or knots in her web of experiences (van Manen, 1990) – an eagerness to see, a desire to witness the image of the child in the everyday, and a concern about adopting the Reggio approach in the U.S. In revisiting her experiences with her, we uncover three knotted-up anticipation experiences.

*I am quite new to the Reggio Emilia approach. I heard about it when I began applying for childcare positions in 2005, but I didn't really know much about it. I often heard Reggio paired with the word "Emergent Curriculum." After a year working as a fulltime toddler teacher, I decided to go back to school to get an MA in linguistics to teach ESL at the community college. I continued to work part time at the daycare as I began my new program.*

*The teacher who took my fulltime spot had worked previously as a substitute teacher at the university lab school where Reggio ideas are practiced. Her approach in the classroom made me realize that my decision to pursue linguistics was a mistake. I remember one day in particular, I was rushing into the school from the playground because we were late for lunch, and some of the toddlers were lagging behind looking at daffodils in the garden. They literally wanted to "stop and smell the flowers," but I was worried about a more pressing issue—staying on schedule. My co-*

*worker on the other hand, saw their interest as an opportunity to investigate daffodils. This became something of a project of which she took photos, documented children's comments about the daffodils, and turned into a mini-documentation panel. I was in awe. It's thanks to her that I am in this Master's program.*

*..After reading some of the theory and the philosophy in the Master's program, I feel I simply need to see it...to make sense of it. Whenever we discuss an interesting idea about early childhood education in class, our professor always asks, "But what does that look like?" I ask this same question about the Reggio schools. I want to see what it looks like. I am eager to see a teaching/learning way of life that is 66 years in the making, where teachers and administrators live according to their image of the child every day. I hope that seeing it could be both inspirational and indicative of the possibilities for the future of education here—even if it takes us another 60 years to get there.*

How authentic this eagerness can be for all of us as we study about a perspective in an international, intercultural context. Through N.P.'s anticipation phenomenon, we begin to see how teachers may struggle to take in and assimilate the meanings associated with Reggio Emilia's municipal preprimary educational approaches without witnessing them first-hand.

N.P.'s eagerness to see demonstrates the first knotted web of her experiences. This eagerness to see may be a way into knowing for N.P. In constructivist principles, educators learn about how the construction of ideas comes more readily through the first-handed experience. Situated learning is a social process whereby knowledge is co-constructed in the specific context and embedded with the physical environment (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and this way of learning plays an essential role in N.P.'s eagerness to see phenomenon. This principle appears to be what N.P.'s eagerness expresses, a first-handed experience that leads to knowing.

N.P.'s second knotted web resides in her ability to witness Reggio educators living "according to their image of the child every day." N.P. writes:

*I guess if I had to choose one thing I want to learn, it would be to figure out where to begin my process as a teacher/researcher/collaborator and still live faithfully by my image of the child. I think that must be where you start [with the image of the child].*

*Like many aspiring teachers (and in-service teachers) in the U.S., I am deeply interested in the Reggio Emilia approach to documentation. I am particularly interested in the documentation of infants and toddlers because they are less likely to openly collaborate with the documenters as older and more verbal children. My burning questions are quite basic as I do not have any experience with documentation in the Reggio sense to develop and articulate a strong image of the child. I have taken photos and video of children, but I have not made it my intention to make learning visible, rather, I have hoped to catch candid moments on camera to share with the families.*

*Documentation as a way to capture children's competencies and shift the image we have of the child will be my primary focus while on the study tour; however, I am also interested in exploring the concept of relation. I feel recently that I have gained a sense of the interdependence between documentation, progettazione, and collaboration. I am certain that further study will bridge gaps with other facets of the Reggio Emilia way (such as parent involvement, provocation, and the environment as the third teacher). In American culture we like to see Reggio broken into isolated parts so that we can digest them (this has certainly helped me), but in practice these parts are intertwined and they depend on one another to be effective.*

*Making learning visible to shift children's image from "needy child" to "child with rights" seems a huge responsibility to me, so my questions are as follows: 1. What should I document? It seems a daunting responsibility to me to decide what is worthy of being documented, or to decide what is learning and what is not. 2. What media should I use? This will often depend on where I am when the moment arises and what is available to me at that time, but it will also be a choice that I make when I am planning ahead. 3. How will I*

*decide what to use in the final exhibit? This will require some "outside insight" into what has been collected. If teachers hope to collaborate with young children, such as infants and toddlers, how can they do so accurately and confidently with children that do not talk with words? 4. Who is it for? This is a question that I assume must be asked before documenting begins. For whom are we making this learning visible? Teachers, the children, and/or their families? Do these audiences ever conflict? 5. Is it difficult to ensure that people aren't excluded from documentation?*

*Sometimes when I look at documentation in US schools, I feel it has an artistic, abstract, almost philosophical quality that might seem exclusive or require education in child development or the Reggio Emilia schools to be understood. At times it feels elitist to me. Is this something Americans have done to documentation? How can learning be made visible and accessible to as many people as possible so we can show who the child is?*

N.P.'s desire to witness the Reggio schools' everyday activity is provoked by her desire to "figure out where to begin...and still live faithfully by my image of the child." She states that this belief in a strong and capable child is foundational to working in the Reggio way. Speaking to a strong image of the child, where one espouses to believe that the child is a full planetary citizen who wants to live with us and has rights from birth is only an ingredient in forming and documenting (making visible) a strong image of the child. Desiring to witness the living practices of "making visible" such a phenomenon in Reggio Emilia and exploring how to document and for whom, which N.P. says "seems a huge responsibility to me," is where N.P.'s second anticipation resides. This action of immersive participation with Reggio educators, who play out their strong images of children in their daily living and acts of making learning visible, is strong in N.P.'s expectancy story. N.P. comes back time and again to wonder about the hugely important roles of documentation and making learning visible. An important question arises for N.P., "Does playing by-stander and witness actually allow N.P. to arrive at her desire?"



In the third knotted web, N.P. expresses her concerns about adopting the Reggio approach in the U.S. as she states,

*I also wonder about the over-arching political system, of which I have no understanding. Could we have municipally funded schools here? Is that what Head Start is? I wonder about some of the practical things like staff turn-over, and (I wouldn't ask this) I wonder how the teachers are compensated financially for their work. In the U.S. you're lucky if you make \$10 an hour working in a preschool, and then the health insurance is \$200+ a month with co-pays, no vision, and no dental. There is a problem here in the U.S. with overall system of schooling young children that prevents the sort of movement that has occurred in Reggio.*

*Based on the articles I have read, it seems like most of the U.S. preschools that successfully explore the different facets of the Reggio approach are campus lab schools, which I'm assuming have more resources than the average preschool. On the other hand, many professors affiliated with university lab schools are the people writing the articles, so there may be many successful small-scale preschools that I haven't heard about.*

In this narrative episode, N.P. turns to the crux of her third knot when she describes the problem she sees in the U.S., “that prevents the sort of movement that has occurred in Reggio.” N.P. seems to be sharing her disbelief in viability of the Reggio approach in her context. As she yearns to partake in understanding Reggio through “seeing”, she also wonders if it is possible to carry out such practices without “more resources than the average preschool.”

N.P.'s anticipations echo a familiarity with so many of our students in the master's program. Through analyzing her story, a major implication arises about the educational focus of the Master's program as one where Reggio-inspired work feels out of reach for our context and that we must go and see it to arrive at understanding.

## **Anticipation- M.J.'s Story and Discussion**

In M.J.'s anticipation, we find two knotted web experiences, wanting to understand assessment strategies (documentation processes) in Reggio and feeling a sense of time and space in the environments. M.J. writes about her interest in and aspiration to understand assessment strategies in the Reggio preprimary schools and infant/toddler centers. She states,

*Reggio! I can't believe I'm actually going! I know it will be an amazing journey. Anyway there are several things I'm interested in finding out about such as: assessing of the children, curriculum development, how they deal with time, and the environment. That may be too much to focus on but it is all so interconnected I should be able to get a general idea of how it all works. I have been revisiting the Julianne Wurm book, Working in the Reggio Way. As I read it with more purpose and intent it seems more enlightening.*

*I am very interested in finding out how they assess their preschoolers. That is what I am completing my action research on as well: appropriate ways for me to assess my preschoolers in development and learning. I am reminded of observation and documentation in the Reggio way. I want to be able to do that, and to some extent I do, but not enough. I also want something a bit more evaluative that reflects what the children are learning and how they are developing. But I just want it for the purpose of comparing them from where they started to where they are now, not to each other. Do they do anything like that in Reggio? Do they compile portfolios? If so, what do they contain? How do they track their children's progress?*

*I realize they take anecdotal records but what is their intent? How are they used? What is their significance or importance? I know they document to show the child's involvement, the process and the project, to help with the direction of the teaching, and to share with parents as to what is going on. But what do they do with them once they have moved on to something else? How do they archive them? Are they included in some*

*portfolio for future reference? And who's or what type, for what purpose? Do they try to document each child? Is this used as an individual evaluative tool to show the child's progress? Does progress have any relevance to them? What is important to them as for growth in a child? How do they capture that?*

M.J.'s core anticipation is her desire to understand the phenomenon of capturing learning. She wonders about children's development, documentation and observation in Reggio classrooms. M.J. is seeking out "something a bit more evaluative that reflects what the children are learning and how they are developing." M.J. wonders if she can resolve this question by visiting the schools and attending the study tour. As Rinaldi (2006) focuses on documentation, she asks educators to consider documentation as a lifetime project to understand. Even then, the questions may endure as teachers contemplate the meaning and purpose of documentation, documentation as assessment, documentation as observation and interpretation of these documents entailing the role of documentation in curriculum planning, reflection, and action.

A second knot in the web reveals itself when M.J. questions notions of time and space in Reggio schools, "Their take on time has been of interest to me too." First, M.J. focuses on her context and then turns to their environments.

*How did we, our society, allow time to be such a controlling factor of our lives? All the hustle and bustle, the scheduling, and fast paced lives we lead. When I read how a day of school is scheduled in Reggio big chunks of time are allocated to various activities. Note, they do have schedules, but they are more free-flowing, not as constraining or chopped up. How does that come to be? When I read through what they cover in day it is much like here but the approach is different. One thing that came to mind was that ours seems to be centered more on direct learning as opposed to indirect, which to me leans more to the Reggio way. They seem to allow for spontaneity. How does one do that and still be assured the children are learning? Do we just take it for granted that if the children are that interested in the direction that the spontaneity*

*leads them they will learn? How does one learn to discern what is relevant and what is not? To me a person that can do that is a true teacher. And that is the sense I get from what I have read about Reggio they seem to envelop the true meaning of teaching. That is what I want to experience while I am there.*

*The environment is a third teacher is such an interesting concept. Having taken the environments class really made me appreciate that even more. It seems to be one Reggio concept that can be readily and successfully implemented. At least it felt that way to me. But what I realized after I changed the environment/space is that it needs to be revisited periodically to see if adjustments need to be made or totally redone to suit the needs of the children and how they are using that space.*

*Their spaces seem so inviting, aesthetically pleasing, and stimulating all at once. From photos I've seen they are so free of clutter, yet the materials are so easily assessable to the children. Which is the ultimate purpose, so someone, a teacher, an adult, doesn't have to be there for them? I'm looking forward to seeing it first hand, to know and feel that experience.*

Through M.J.'s experience of eagerness to understand another school system's cultural context, she attempts to understand differences in the way time and environments are resourced. M.J. remarks on her meaning of time in various ways. She comments on the hustle and bustle of the day, the daily schedule, and the free-flow. This makes her wonder how they cover so much in their day with this different approach from what she has practiced in her own approach. She says that the environment "seem so inviting, aesthetically pleasing, and stimulating all at once." As M.J. is capturing an essence of the anticipated differences, she also notes that she ultimately desires to experience "the true meaning of teaching."

A question lingers about a possible experience in M.J.'s second anticipation knot. Can one experience the "true meaning of teaching" by witnessing it? With M.J.'s prior knowledge of the differences in cultural relevancy of time and space, she may have

a new experience in relation to time and space while visiting a Reggio school and this may lead her to a “true meaning of teaching.” Ultimately, M.J. confirms this attitude of seeking the experiences of time and space when she states,

*I realize their approach is so culturally embedded that even my questioning the way they do things may in reality have little relevance to what I can do, or to my program, in the overall scheme of things. But, just the experience will have a profound effect on the way I view things, and the way I think. Ultimately, whatever I take from Reggio will only be my own interpretation and understanding of how they do things. I know only Reggio is truly Reggio.*

Even in her anticipation, M.J. finds resolve in what she perceives as differences and accepts that she can only see from the outside as a way to affect her practice.

### **Additional Teacher Educator Thoughts from the Anticipations**

In the end, based on N.P.’s and M.J.’s anticipation narrative-episodes, we begin to listen more carefully to what are students expect from our program by asking ourselves whether we share these anticipations or whether other possibilities exist that could be approached through additional readings and discussions. N.P. and M.J. reference the writings of Wurm (2005), Cadwell (1997), and Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998) as we discuss these narrative-episodes. These book choices and overarching concepts are important but capture only some aspects of what we, as teacher educators, believe can be valuable in anticipating a Reggio study tour experience. Others would include more recent publications about in-depth work such as in Vecchi, Filippini, and Giudici’s (2008) *Dialogues with Places*; children’s engagement in the city as fully participating citizens as in Vecchi’s (2002) *Theater Curtain: The Ring of Transformation*, and the positioning of learning in society as in Giudici, Rinaldi, and Krechevsky (2001) *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners*.

The students’ (and our own) anticipations grow as we share them with the group and as we approach our trip to Reggio schools and eventually reflected

on our experiences. N.P. and M.J. shared their post-tour experiences and reflections.

### **N.P.’s After-Experiences – Reflections and Discussion**

N.P.’s after-experiences hold two knots in the web of experiences. The first knot was woven around change as a constant reminder of humanness and the second around her language barrier. First, N.P. declares,

*They ARE human! The municipal schools of Reggio Emilia don’t hold all the answers. It was interesting to hear about the changes that are taking place in the town and the schools, and to hear about the challenges the schools face as a result of these changes. For example, at the Panda Infant-Toddler Center, the pedgogista spoke about the recent influx of immigrants in the last 10 years and how this has led to a new position for “cultural mediators,” people who help the teachers and schools to create closer ties with the new families. At the Tondelli school, the pedagogista spoke at length about the potential challenges facing children and families as they move from the municipal schools into the state primary schools. They had many ideas they were trying out with the children such as inviting primary school students to visit, taking their children to visit the primary schools etc. These ideas are not static however; the ideas and experiments are on-going.*

*These are just a few examples of the “works in progress” at some of the schools. This was very meaningful to me because it shows how the schools are treated almost as living organisms—that is they are constantly evolving to accommodate newcomers and the changing times. All too often, I catch myself looking for the answer—the curriculum or the system that will work for everyone. In reality what works today probably won’t work tomorrow and what works for one school may not suit another. The municipal schools, in spite of all the attention they receive from around the world, are always looking for the ways that they must change and adapt to new groups of children. They haven’t stopped trying just because what they already have is so wonderful. It is continuous.*

N.P.'s experience of learning about change seems to revolve around how educators express their imperfect nature as "experimenting" and "on-going" as she states that "they ARE human" and that "the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia don't hold all the answers."

This learning experience about the human-ness of Reggio educators, wrapped up in the life world of the *not-knowing*, *experimenting* and *evolving to accommodate* is a reminder of Malaguzzi's declaration of the ignorance he forged with the early educators, a declaration that has been carried forward in the thinking of the Reggio way (Spaggiari, 2004). This declaration of ignorance liberates educators to allow a nature of inquiry into study and situates the teacher as listener and learner within a community of learners. As N.P. explains, "All too often, I catch myself looking for the answer—the curriculum or the system that will work for everyone. In reality what works today probably won't work tomorrow and what works for one school may not suit another." Her declaration demonstrates an important aspect to her learning experience, where she becomes liberated to a state of not-knowing and not holding onto *the* answers.

A second knot in the web of N.P.'s study tour experiences coalesces in how her language barrier took from her experiences. She writes,

*I was really intrigued by the concept of a cultural mediator and would have liked to have learned more about this. I wonder if the cultural mediators are people who are trained in cross-cultural communications. Are they translators? Are they anthropologists or ethnographers? I wonder how many there are total and whether they are assigned to one school or many. I think it's wonderful that they have someone coming from the outside to assess the situation with an outside perspective and to help mediate culture and language barriers.*

*My language barrier took from my experience. It would have been wonderful to read the documentation on the walls in the schools, to listen to the children interact, and to listen to the teachers interact with the children—particularly in the atelier. I'm interested in how the teachers speak to the children and how they get ideas from*

*the children. It's difficult to understand fully how these situations/conversations unfold without speaking Italian and understanding the conversations.*

*I think visiting the schools made many of the concepts that were confusing to me before the trip much clearer. Right now the struggle for me is to organize all of the new information in my brain to explain it coherently and to make it applicable!*

N.P.'s inability to read and speak Italian made the experience difficult for her. Yet, she also noted that "I think visiting the schools made many of the concepts that were confusing to me before the trip much clearer." N.P. was still able to construct a meaningful experience on the study tour despite language barriers. Was this partially due to what she terms "culture mediators" whom she believes assess "the situation with an outside perspective...to help mediate culture and language barriers." And, as we all remarked, the large display panel documents in the classrooms, corridors, and entryways were primarily in English and Italian.

Translation was always available at any seminar, meeting and gathering, but not readily available during classroom visitations. So, N.P.'s language barrier limitations experienced during the study tour were primarily during direct classroom interactions between children and/or teachers. N.P. wonders how much was lost in the translation process which rests in the center of N.P.'s experience. She noticed the importance placed on the meaning of words and their uses in the Reggio experience. An example of this importance of words reveals itself in one of her small group discussion experiences where the children's studio representational work was called "artistic" by a U.S. educator. As the use of this word "artistic" was tossed out, it became a centerpiece of the exchange, albeit heavily scrutinized as a good choice of words. The pedagoga questioned the U.S. meaning of artistic, wondering if it was meant to diminish the complex thinking that went into the two and three dimensional representations constructed by children's drawn out consideration of a subject matter. N.P. was witness to and engaged this sort of study tour exchange which confronts our sensibility to, and deepens our

awareness of, the meaning we co-construct in cross-cultural understanding.

### **MJ's After-Experiences—Reflections and Discussion**

M.J. first knot in the web of after-experiences rests in questioning her own practices. She questions her program back home and her practices with both high school students and her preschoolers after experiencing the schedule flow and beauty of Reggio environments. M.J. stated:

*I still feel like I'm in a whirl of the things "learned" while in Reggio. Some of that knowledge just came in the form of clarifying the way things are done. Having seen some actual practices in real life now I grasp the intent much better.*

*I was interested in how their schedule of time for the day works, especially with the preschoolers. Not only was it thoroughly explained to me to my understanding but I was able to witness some of it in action. That was very beneficial because I would like to do that sort of schedule with my preschoolers.*

*Another thing that caught my attention was the absence of clutter. The minimalist quality that seemed to be evident everywhere in the schools I attended. Yet, the children had access to all sorts of materials. But they were like mini "displays" so neat and organized. It seemed so inviting. It was meaningful to me because I am trying to achieve that in my classroom.*

After M.J. reflects on her experiences in action, the minimalist quality of the environments, children's access to materials, and displays, she immediately turns to her questioning crisis, an internal experience she faces about her job, her reality as she deems it, and the limitations she faces.

*My job is two-fold. First of all, I am a high school teacher and that is my main focus, working with high school students who "may" potentially work with children. Hence, the second part of my job, I work with preschoolers. As part of the curriculum my entry level and advanced students are provided an opportunity to work with preschoolers in our on-site preschool lab,*

*interacting with them, observing them, creating and implementing lessons, etc. and being "teachers" of sorts as they advance in the program. However, as I near the completion of my Master's I feel like I am being pushed and pulled by both. Seriously, I wake up nights thinking about my job!!, especially the last couple of nights anticipating writing this!*

*As a teacher, how do I teach high school students to teach? What do I teach them? How do I "guide" them into valuing the children? Being able to truly listen to what the preschoolers are saying? How do I have them come up with lessons that are more than just "busy work" of sorts for the preschoolers? I feel overwhelmed with this responsibility I think I have to both sets of students (pre and high school). I need to make changes but I don't really know how? I really need to rethink my program. I feel like my students aren't really putting forth much effort into "why" they are doing what they are doing.*

M.J. becomes preoccupied and concerned about her own teaching contexts and how she might proceed. M.J.'s declarations open doors for thinking about this disequilibrium experience in the pursuit of learning new ways of being, learning and teaching. M.J.'s disequilibrium is a launching point into new practices so long as she does not become stuck with feelings of worry that turn to despair. We find M.J. pushes through her worry as she reflects in the end.

*I think what I want them to do is think and question. I know that seems like that should be something they are already doing but it isn't. They are so used to doing what they are told they have a hard time thinking and figuring out things on their own. They are so similar to the preschoolers in that respect, meaning the standard for teaching is just that, them doing what they are told to do and not guiding them to think and figure out what needs to be done. That is what the Reggio way does, it instills children to think and problem solve and as they grow up they know what that is and that is powerful.*

*I also understand the concept of not being able to "do Reggio" here. But you can take some ideas from there and implement basic components. The*

*idea of the Reggio philosophy is so all encompassing. In Reggio, it is a way of life, with its own values and culture built-in. That is what you can't bring back. I so love the way they value the children. It was amazing to see that in action when I visited the preschool.*

*I probably could add more but I'm not sure how to articulate some of my other thoughts and feelings I have from being in Reggio. I guess that will come with time and more reflection—a true Reggio concept!*

M.J.'s experience in the Reggio preprimary schools and infant/toddler centers opens her up to construct understanding and articulate differences between the systems of education as reconciliation in her own practices at home. Construction, articulation and reconciliation appear as the second knot in her web of experience. Primarily, she speaks of her own context, "The standard for teaching is just that, them doing what they are told to do and not guiding them to think and figure out what needs to be done." Reflecting back on her own school and her previous teaching experience led her to a new belief in the Reggio way that "instills children to think and problem solve and as they grow up they know what that is and that is powerful." The phenomenon of reconciliation between how M.J. practices at home and what she witnessed in Reggio appears to be challenging to articulate.

While M.J. worries about bringing what she witnesses and learns on the Reggio Study Tour, she also notes that she can do this by allowing time and through more reflection. On the one hand, she recognizes that the hardest thing to do in this world is to live in it (Whedon, 2001), and on the other, she also realizes that she has to keep on living, growing while realizing her students and her own potential.

### **Additional Teacher Educator Thoughts from the After-Experiences**

In the end, M.J.'s notion of allowing time to pass between the experiences in Reggio and our own continued living is given considerable attention by all of us on the study tour. Even N.P. reflects this sentiment as she states, "Right now the struggle for me is to organize all of the new information in my brain to explain it coherently and to make it applicable!" We agree with M.J. and N.P. in their

struggle to explain what we felt, saw, heard and wondered about as our own learning processes were invigorated in an acute way through studying, reading and making sense of the experiences of our students in relationship to our own experiences of the study tour.

### **Conclusions**

Rinaldi (2006) says that we are not in crisis if we are not listening. We must be listening as we feel an immediate crisis upon us as teacher-educators while reviewing, analyzing and developing stopping points for the anticipations and after-experience reflections.

### **Stopping Points: Anticipation Experiences**

Noticing N.P.'s anticipation experiences of *eagerness to see, desire to witness living the image of the child*, and *her disbelief in viability of the Reggio approach in her own context* and M.J.'s of *desiring to understand assessment and documentation strategies* and *questioning the sense of time and space in Reggio preprimary schools* we begin to wonder how U.S. students are set up to believe about the principles and practices of education in the municipal pre-primary schools and infant toddler centers of Reggio Emilia, Italy. What choices do we make to steer their learning? We wonder what big ideas are missing in our curriculum. We also question how these choices are made by faculty seeking to help others understand such phenomena.

Can we give our students everything we've got and more, reaching beyond our own threshold of our own knowledge—*stretching ourselves*? We wonder if this is what educators in Reggio are trying to ultimately convey which helps us consider our own practice in teacher education? *Go* on the journey of learning with the student rather than *take them* on the journey. This research project is our attempt at going on the journey with our students, one where we would stop and listen, pay attention to their questions and seek after our conceptual holes, similar to what we would ask them to do in their learning with children. This notion of going on the journey fundamentally shifts the image of the teacher from banker of knowledge (Friere, 2003) to co-learner sitting around the round table of learning

with the student (Palmer, 1998). Recasting and enacting a competent and capable image of the teacher (based on a strong and capable image of the child) becomes paramount in our teacher education programs (Parnell, 2010).

Additionally, how do we tease out what we facilitate in our programs, perhaps through learning with the students how to learn and teach—using a metacognitive framework where we bring back the documents of our students learning and our thinking to the group for (re)consideration (Parnell, 2011). This becomes the task of a lifetime to discern what to document and (re)consider, as students come to us with differing interests, backgrounds and ideas and goals. However, if we engage in dialogue, narration and the acts of listening (Rinaldi, 2006), then we can uncover the nuances of student anticipation, based mostly in questions, wonderings and deep reflective considerations.

A'Beckett's (2007) notion of the *in-between*, between me and the other, where there is pleasure in mutuality and in the unknown dissipates our commitment to time and space consciousness. The in-between is a wonderful place to hold reflective considerations. We found something profoundly cherished in this time together, reflecting back on the narrative experiences to make meaning. A'Beckett suggests that time and space disappear in this experience of engagement, where when we reflect back on the experiences, our meaning lies in the pleasure of mutuality, not in the coveted amount of time we took or even where we were located while engaging experiences.

Moreover, as Spiaggiari (2004) stated in a conference proceeding, "American educators have a tendency to slice up their time like the bacon slicer. Here in Reggio, we like to think of our time in terms of appointments of the day. Who and what we will encounter..." How we 'spend our time' is a crucial matter to consider in early childhood work. Slowing down to catch our breath, smell the smells around us, hear the sounds, feel the floor beneath our feet and stopping to pay attention to the in-between (whether reading a student's reflection or spending time in reminiscence of experiences together) are ways to communicate our sense of time differently. Our pleasure in mutuality comes

when we revisit and carefully analyze with others our experiences such as what we anticipate when going on a study tour endeavor. An endeavor that has challenged our senses and thinking and profoundly influenced our praxis which is to say our reflective practice in action.

### **Stopping Point: After-Experience Reflections**

After returning from the Reggio study tour, we see new *frameworks of mind* (new ways to see/believe in how we can practice our work as teacher researchers) emerge that share little with our original questions for the students to address. Instead, the complexity of a great cultural divide appears in their after-experience reflections that make us question our teacher research practices. M.J. states, "The idea of the Reggio philosophy is so all encompassing. In Reggio, it is a way of life, with its own values and culture built-in. That is what you can't bring back." N.P. also shares a similar framework, "This [works in progress] was very meaningful to me because it shows how the schools are treated almost as living organisms—that is they are constantly evolving to accommodate new comers and the changing times. All too often, I catch myself looking for the answer—the curriculum or the system that will work for everyone. In reality what works today probably won't work tomorrow and what works for one school may not suit another." These frameworks demonstrate the importance of coming to a larger perspective and knowing that we never "*do Reggio*" in our context as Carter (2009) points out, but that we can be inspired and provoked by their work.

In general, our teacher education programs tend to adopt a framework of one size fits all curriculum, not centered on our programs as living organisms that evolve to accommodate newcomers. Often times, we hear colleagues at national conferences discuss the required curriculum; an adult education model centered on teaching rather than on listening and learning from our students how to teach. This is a big implication we can learn from both the Reggio approach and this research study in which we have aimed to hear the voices from and reflect with our students. A framework for equalizing the notions of learning and teaching and possibly even putting learning ahead of teaching creates a sense of equity in a system; A system where teaching has

long been a focus of attention in ‘teacher education.’

Fundamentally, we believe that our students find power and strength in their own relationship to teaching through the experience—they find their own voices as teachers who constantly learn, ponder on, and grow in their practice as they reflect on experiences of their trip. N.P. poignantly states “Right now the struggle for me is to organize all of the new information in my brain to explain it coherently and to make it applicable!” And, M.J. states, “I probably could add more but I’m not sure how to articulate some of my other thoughts and feelings I have from being in Reggio. I guess that will come with time and more reflection—a true Reggio concept!” They appear settled in this framework of knowing that they cannot and do not know everything and that over time; they will understand a concept more maturely through their practicing to articulate and make meaning of their experiences. We believe this comes through our shared reflection time, when we looked back upon our various narratives (experiences) and made meaning of them together.

One of the most essential frameworks that appear in the students’ after-experience reflections rests in NP’s words of “work in progress.” We believe this idea holds cultural connotations associated with the meaning. In speaking with Carla Rinaldi on how we can essentially make paradigm shifts in our U.S. context around the politics of childhood and our society’s *image of the child* shown as competent, capable and fully-participating citizen of our planet with rights to a high-quality education, we hear her say that this will not only take 60 years but a lifetime of our work. In considering the schools’ “work in progress” through layers, we begin to see how this framework of mind starts to focus for us.

This *lifetime-of-work* framework takes practice in building up a system, piece-by-piece, slowly and patiently, and collaborating on and reflecting on our daily practice in our own way, only to uncover what Reggio educators term finding the *extraordinary* in the *everyday*. The extraordinary rests in the immediacy of our experiences, something we ask our students to articulate and share in our teacher researcher community of learners. We have to slow

down enough and pay attention to its merit, even document it, so as to call into existence its meaning and power in transforming the meaning of early childhood education, teacher-as-researcher practice and learning and teaching. This notion of paying attention is similar to the story of *Laura and the Watch* found most recently in Edwards and Rinaldi (2009). A series of six photos encapsulates an entire way of understanding the Reggio experience as a system of values. As MJ states, “It is a way of life, with its own values and culture built-in. That is what you can’t bring back. I so love the way they value the children.” MJ’s love for their value of children becomes our love for valuing the learner (our students and ourselves).

In summary, developing frameworks of mind where we slow down, pay attention to the work at hand, make visible the learning, and reflect in our process of learning with our students (and theirs) how to learn and teach, most assuredly is due to our travel experience. We recast our ways of thinking of and framing our understanding; and in coordination with, and juxtaposition to, our Reggio experiences, our meaning of education appears profoundly altered.

## Implications

We don’t believe that education is a linear process where what the teacher says and shows becomes what the student believes and grows into practicing. We believe in places where questions can live on and answers can only be sought after, rather than found for certain as we have demonstrated in our journey with the students. This is a practice other educators could both enjoy and learn a great deal from their students as partners in learning—making for a dynamic teacher research component in teacher education programs.

Through our students’ narrative-episodes, the idea that M.J. puts forth, “I think what I want them to do is think and question” and N.P. suggests, “These ideas are not static however; the ideas and experiments are on-going” thwarts our authority and rightly so. Teacher educators don’t have the answers to our perplexing and complex early childhood education and neither do the teachers in Reggio Emilia. We are all just seeking good ways to live, interact, learn and be together in society. In Reggio Emilia, this complexity of seeking readily



appears and offers up more and more questions for us to consider.

In the end, does our work boil down to listening in the ways Rinaldi (2006) suggests? This is not just an act of merely hearing one another. We have to listen with all of our senses as we know the child does in the womb. How can we build contexts that lead to collaboration, reflection, and listening? Out of the writings of our students, one references this listening value as such: "I'm not sure how to articulate some of my other thoughts and feelings I have from being in Reggio. I guess that will come with time and more reflection." We build our context of listening by learning to listening to ourselves, reflecting our ideas and then showing others that our ears are open to them, as in this research context where narrative-episodes become listened to.

Lastly, as our students impressed upon us, "The municipal schools, in spite of all the attention they receive from around the world, are always looking for the ways that they must change and adapt to the new. They haven't stopped trying just because what they already have is so wonderful. It is continuous." In our sense of listening to these students and reading their narratives, we find ourselves wanting more experiences with this sort of research as an act of listening to, with and for our students. Our future research implication comes out of N.P.'s quote about adapting and continuing on in the journey of learning together. We find ourselves seeking out more students interests in the experiences of Reggio Emilia and other places in the world and more trips are brewing. The next research trip seeks to capture students' understandings of the extraordinary in the everyday while abroad in the Reggio experience.

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