Early Childhood Social Studies Learning for Social Justice

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Abstract

Early childhood social studies students deserve to learn in a powerful, in-depth fashion about their interests with teachers who facilitate cognitive and affective growth. Humanistic teachers offer democratic learning experiences characterized by exploration and inquiry within a challenging and caring environment. Growth toward acceptance of all types of diversity and every classmate is featured. Through discussion about social studies topics, learners proceed to graphically represent what they learn. This powerful social studies learning is found in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The tenets, strategies, and approaches are easily transferable and modified to create powerful and exemplar early childhood social studies learning for social rights and social justice. Early childhood is the perfect place to set social justice learning in motion.

Learning experiences quicken and engender learners’ curiosity. At best, learning creates a sense of momentum that nudges learners toward reflective thinking, greater learning potential, and increased initiative (Dewey, 1938). At the heart of authentic, humanistic education is the exploring of learning in an in-depth manner within caring environments. Teachers who focus on
how young minds, bodies, and souls develop, and then recursively reflect about how young learners think, enact teaching practice rooted in the whole learner. Subsequently, they tend to have young learners represent cognitive and affective learning experiences through physical means. They truly implement innovative, child-focused teaching.

Young learners who experience making choices and pursuing particularized interests while having teaching that helps them push the boundaries of their thinking develop language skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Pluralistic populations of co-learners, including the teacher, an art teacher, parents, and community within an enriching early childhood environment are ideal for the humanistic development of the whole child. Instruction that is transacted through processes of in-depth investigations, where cultural capital is revered, and where these humanistic ideals occur within a democratically managed classroom curriculum are cited as exemplary in early childhood settings (Katz, 1998). It is noteworthy that social studies researchers continue to highlight these identical characteristics as the most powerful methods of learning (Savage & Armstrong, 2000; Sunal & Haas, 2004).

**Overview of the Reggio Emilia Image of the Child**

The ontology, the belief system, of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education places the child at the pinnacle of learning. Loris Malaguzzi, in *The Hundred Languages of Children*, poetically says that you cannot separate the head from the body. The child is evident as a whole and capable learner. Children are inquisitive, creative, capable, innovative, social, young citizens who are taken seriously.

Philosophically, a constructivist approach guides the learning approach. *Pedagogisti* (teacher advisors) believe children construct knowledge as they interact freely with the environment and in the ways in which they work in the physical and social world around them (Katz, 1994).

*Il Nido*, the early childhood centers from 6 weeks to age 3 in Reggio Emilia, Italy, literally translates into English as “the nest.” The notion of care is unmistakable. The next level of education is from ages 3 – 6. As authors of their own learning and development, children guide the direction of the curriculum, mainly through the study of long-term projects. Pedagogisti create the learning environment and develop the learning materials.

The Reggio Emilia approach is an unique combination of cognitive and symbolic processes of learning occurring in a caring, educative, child sensitive environment (Gandini, 1993; Piaget, 1973). The total development of the child is the express intention of the Reggio educational approach. Education is viewed as dynamic rather than as static, as often it is in the United States as teachers tend to rely on stated and specific objectives.

In the Reggio schools, there is no separation between a long-term project and reaching a goal. Children reach countless emergent goals. Possibilities are limitless. Goals emerge only as temporary beacons within activities chosen by the children as components of the overall project. Children are expected to think creatively, innovatively, and critically through exploration in an unhurried fashion. Essential criteria that are always kept in the forefront of the minds of the pedagogisti (teachers) are the children’s interests and potential.

Within these democratic and autonomous learning environments, developmental (logico-mathematical), local, and environmental knowledge are key. Play is a powerful method of inquiry employed in Reggio schools. Equally, children and their learning processes are respected. Children reciprocally respect learning and educators in return. In order to graphically
represent learning through varied interpretations, children often use art as a medium. Supplies are plentiful from a community project for recycling, remida. Altelieristas (art teachers) assist children in representing and documenting learning through artistic means from multiple media from the remida.

The Reggio Emilia Approach and the Social Studies

This broad description of what humanistic learning in the Reggio Emilia approach looks like also encapsulates a powerful approach to early childhood social studies. The Reggio approach to learning features collaborative relationships among all involved in the educative setting: children, teachers, and parents. “Walking toward knowledge” is a metaphor that educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy employ (Wexler, 2004). The notion of walking suggests a potential end but not an evident end. So there is room for exploration along a flexible route for new opportunities that perhaps were not foreseen (Eisner, 2005). Reaching a learner’s potential, being a co-constructor of knowledge, and challenging learners to cross thinking boundaries in order to create a better citizenry is the particular type of walk collaboratively accomplished in Reggio Emilia (Moss, 2004). This is the nature of the social studies.

The approaches to early childhood education utilized in Reggio Emilia cannot be generalized because it is so context specific to a place in the world where people who experienced a fascist history begged for a different type of education for their children. They wanted an education for their children that would create deep and autonomous thinkers. Cooperative organization is a hallmark of the people of Reggio, again, a result of their liberation from fascist dictatorship. However, the features of this the method from the idyllic towns of Reggio Emilia and those nearby can only be transferred to other locales that envision implications for such democratic learning goals. The history of the region of Emilia Romagna is so inextricably entwined with political, economic, agricultural, educational, social, and cultural conditions that its early childhood educational methods cannot be replicated anywhere.

Learning is considered an emergent process, not one completed project after another. Children are accepted as competent, full of potential, and connected to other children and adults within the learning community (Malaguzzi, 1993). They are rich in and of themselves, not in need of enrichment but active agents in knowledge construction (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, 1999). Notably to social studies educators, children in Reggio Emilia are understood and recognized as citizens, members of society with responsibilities in the community, nation, and world. In this context, the pedagogical work of Reggio Emila is the outcome of how the pedagogues first and foremost image the learner (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999).

Within Reggio Emilia, social discourse is valued and qualitatively central to the process among all stakeholders. The curriculum is not envisioned as a document that is written down but rather a three-pronged approach. The first prong is the child, the learner. The second is the educative environment, and the third prong is the parents. Cultural capital, knowledge held by parents and the community, is deeply valued.

Children’s rights are greatly respected in Reggio Emilia environments and in those that are inspired by them. Constructing learning within richly designed environments through active use of manipulatives, objects, and mobility in the learning spaces promotes communication and discovery, and develops learning potential (Gandini, 1993). Creating nurturing environments where democracy and diversity are celebrated while young children explore and actively learn, using an abundant array of materials and resources is the ideal early childhood educative
approach to learning. This is congruent with enacting effective and powerful social studies education (Sunal & Haas, 2005).

Dewey’s (1938) notion of students learning together with teachers was so integral to the United States’ curricular experience that he saw reciprocity in learning as integral to schooling. Dewey often referred to teachers and learners in the same breath. Frequently, he posed questions about the role of learners, again including teachers, regarding freedom. Questions, too, were posed about whether textbooks challenged or stifled the development of the learner. Cognitive connections made through interactions were intricately linked to the experiential education that Dewey so valued. He challenged the traditional status quo of education with a progressive and humanistic ideal that he considered to be in harmony with democracy. These are characteristics congruent with the experience in early education in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and in a best practice social studies early childhood program.

From discussion about social studies topics, the learners proceed to graphically representing what they have learned. All present within the educative environment document learning. Teachers document student learning. Students document their own learning. Teachers document their own learning as well. Learners document what they learn and often what their friends articulate they have learned. A community of learners is strikingly evident here, again a tenet of early childhood social studies.

Frequently, documentation transforms into another form of learning, as it derives from the act of reflection. In addition, it is another means of communication (Scott, 2001). Learning is now made visible. It is visible in how the learner chooses to represent what has been learned. Visible learning also is a convincing commitment to the visual and graphic arts. It serves as a measure for accountability.

Representation of learning takes place when young social studies learners document their thoughts, feelings, and observations through graphic arts. Of course, their cultural capital is embedded in what they say, write, draw, research, and photograph. As many of the students are multi-ethnic, English is often a second language. Finding documentation accomplished in two languages is not uncommon. It is another way to help all of the young social studies learners build language skills, reflect on learning, and assess learning.

When working on projects, those who are writers write for the non-writers or the pedagogisti do so. What is captured is what the learner actually says about that which has been learned in regard to a particular portion of the social studies topic of study. As students present their projects, and again converse with their classmates about what they have learned, the reflective level adds depth of learning. Inherent in this process is the genesis of the next segment of study, as there are always points of inquiry uncovered and embedded in this part of the process. New topics are discovered for study.

Digital photos serve to document almost everything in Reggio Emilia. Students and parents have grown to expect digital representations of what students do and learn. The number of photos taken is extensive. Many are presented in multi-media presentations that run recursively throughout the day in the schools, so that anyone walking through will see what the students have learned and thought about concerning a particular topic such as “what lives in the ocean.”

We still have much to learn. There are many other schools worthy of emulation. Since early childhood social studies has long been overlooked, as educators, we have an exemplar in the Reggio Emilia approach to education from which to extrapolate what works in our community and schools. Citizens in democratic societies have to learn and develop critical and
reflective thinking skills. The youngest learners deserve social studies at its finest, exploring and inquiring within a challenging and caring environment. Studying the depths of their interests with teachers who facilitate their cognitive and affective growth toward acceptance of all diversity and one another. This is humanistic, democratic learning. This is social studies learning for social rights and social justice.
References


