

Beginning to Change: Reggio-Inspired Change in a Public School Early Childhood Center, Preschool through First Grade
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The image of all children as being capable and full of potential with the right to exemplary learning experiences in social, cognitive, creative and physical development provides daily inspiration and impetus in considering what is best practice at Maplewood Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center. To this end, with the support of the school district, the early childhood center has chosen to study and be inspired by the principles and values of the world-renowned schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy in addition to being guided by the Missouri Early Learning Standards.

The preschools of Reggio Emilia were deemed one of the 10 best school systems in the world in 1991. They earned this honor through developing a system of collaboration among teachers, parents and the community. This educational approach of high quality for young children from birth through six years of age was created following the decimation of their community during World War II. The quality of the system was evident in the comprehensive nature of projects developed through teachers' intense observation of children's play and interests, and listening to their evolving ideas and theories.

While the MRH school district was not devastated by a world war, it was on the brink of collapse by the late 1990's financially and academically. The school board had to make a decision: find new leadership or close up. They chose the latter and the district began to rebuild in 2000. The work began at the early childhood center, where teaching was well intended, but lacked intentionality.

By 2005, with recent employment of competent and enthusiastic teachers the educators were ready to begin studying a philosophy of early childhood education that had proven itself over time. MRH educators looked to the work of Reggio for inspiration in early childhood education with a higher purpose. The voice of the child and thoughtful dialogue between teachers and children was non-existent at MRH ECC. The conversation in the classroom was more about giving directions, explaining teacher selected activities and children asking for permission.

Classroom environments were more a reflection of teacher personalities, rather than intentionally designed spaces for powerful learning. Most were cluttered with long ago used materials, furniture arranged in maze-like fashion to accommodate all of the homeless items collected over years of teaching. A significant change was needed and images from the municipal preschools in Reggio Emilia provided the motivation.

Since 2005, MRH ECC educators have been actively involved with educators from Webster University, St. Louis, MO in pursuing what it can mean to be inspired by the Reggio Approach in relation to the specific context of the Maplewood Richmond Heights School District, an urban district that is culturally and economically diverse.

This collaboration spearheaded by MRH Superintendent, Dr. Linda Henke and Webster University Dean of Education, Dr. Brenda Fyfe and supported by MRH ECC principal, Dr. Cyndi Hebenstreit and Webster University adjunct professor/MRH ECC pedagogical coordinator, Jennifer Strange along with the participation of MRH ECC classroom teachers has steadily contributed to renewed success in the early childhood program. Most recently, surveys indicate that families are moving back into the surrounding neighborhoods because of this success. This is in contrast with the period when families were moving out of the school district because of the challenges within the school system. Particularly in connection to innovative change at the MRH ECC, the preschool classes are now filled well in advance of the approaching school year. Families from outside the school district are making inquiries as to whether their children can attend MRH ECC because of what they are hearing about the uniqueness and success of the program. Maplewood Richmond Heights School District and Webster University have also partnered in the presentation of two national conferences concerning Reggio-inspired early childhood education in 2009 and 2010. Webster University students participate in practicum and student teaching programs at MRH ECC. Several Webster University graduate classes are being held in the MRH Early Childhood Center. MRH teachers are taking advantage of pursuing higher degrees through these classes. And, a graduate certificate regarding the role of the pedagogical coordinator or *pedagogista* is currently being developed.

Maplewood Richmond Heights School District and Webster University also partnered from 2006-2008 with **ARCHS, Area Resources for Community and Human Services, a not-for-profit organization serving as a "Community Partnership" organization on behalf of MO for the greater St. Louis area. ARCHS particular interest in supporting success of an urban school district through the early childhood philosophy of Reggio Emilia inspired this agency to financially share in the providing of professional development of MRH ECC educators as well as providing some of the dollars to redesign aspects of the Early Childhood Center's physical plant. Dr. Laura Lambrix, an ARCHS grant administrator during that time, reflects, "MRH proved to be a worthy grant recipient. The development of quality education at the early childhood center through the Reggio Approach has not been a fleeting interest but one that has been sustained over the last 5 years and through onsite conferences the educators have shared their new knowledge and understanding with others in the community and out of state at a reasonable cost."

These innovations and successes encouraged the building of a recent inventive and forward thinking preschool addition to the early childhood center. In fall of 2009, this exciting new space inspired by the school environments of Reggio Emilia opened as a place of joyful learning for the children, family members and educators of Maplewood Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center. This unique environment certainly supports the Reggio-inspired value of Teachers, Children and Parents as Researchers. Indeed, this innovative place for young children allows for all of the Missouri Early Learning Standards and Reggio-inspired values to be developed in an

imaginative space that supports room and time for in-depth ideas and meaningful interactions.

The MRH ECC and Webster University educators are continuing to pursue what it can mean to be inspired by the Reggio Approach in relation to the specific context of the Maplewood Richmond Heights School District. The following principles and values from Reggio Emilia provide a framework for their ongoing work.

- Image of the Child
- Environment as Third Teacher
- 100 Languages of Children
- Interdependence between Organization and Collaboration
- Teachers, Children and Parents as Researchers
- Documentation Makes Learning Visible

This value-inspired framework closely aligns with the Missouri Early Learning Standards for Social and Emotional Development, Literacy, Math, Science and Physical Development. This value-inspired framework has also brought innovative success to an urban early childhood program. The following photographic images document examples of the changes and success of Maplewood Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center.