BU Hosts *The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children*

Traveling exhibition on Reggio Emilia philosophy provides hands-on learning for preschool educators

Preschool teachers Jill Olive (left) and Kim Haywood try out some of the creative activities the Reggio Emilia approach offers children. The seminar was part of *The Wonder of Learning*, an early childhood education traveling exhibition, hosted by Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development.

CYDNEY SCOTT (2)

On a recent summer morning, a roomful of preschool teachers from across Massachusetts are at tables, playing with makeshift items like popsicle sticks, colorful sponges, shiny metal gaskets, and recycled materials and using them to create cities, bridges, and whimsical sculptures.

The exercise is part of a workshop at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development to help early childhood educators learn new ways to encourage play and the principles of Reggio Emilia, an educational philosophy originated in the northern Italian city, where children play in sun-filled public preschool ateliers.

"Learning is social and inspired by doing," says workshop leader David Ramsey, a Boston Public Schools Early Childhood program director. "It's fun, there's a lot of laughs when children play, but cognitive development is at the core of everything here."

The workshop is one of more than a dozen forums tied to the traveling exhibition *The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children*, which is on display at BU's Fenway Campus through November 15.

Hosted by BU, the exhibition is organized by the Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network (BARIN), a group of early childhood educators who want to spread the word about the renowned Italian preschool educational system and its much-imitated approach to learning.

Organizers hope the road show will draw as many as 20,000 educators from across the region to view the self-guided exhibition and participate in workshops and forums focused on the state of early childhood education in the United States.

David Chard, Wheelock dean ad interim, says early childhood educators need more opportunities like this to investigate best practices, receive professional development, and learn about state-of-the-art thinking in early education.

"To have this traveling exhibition that very few cities in America have is very important to bringing attention to the needs of young children," Chard says. "We also want to draw in policymakers and the general public to get beyond lip service about the importance of early childhood education and talk about the more serious needs of the field."

Those needs are significant. The wages of early childhood educators are often so low that they qualify for public assistance to help support their own families, according to a 2016 US Department of Education report, which found that teachers—nearly entirely women—typically earn less than

tree trimmers and hairdressers. And although some of the most critical years for brain development are from birth to age five, the field has difficulty attracting and retaining experienced, well-educated staff.

"As our understanding of children advances, and practices evolve in the field," Chard says, "teachers may have no access to professional development, and the children they serve are unable to benefit."

The Wonder of Learning seeks to fill that void by showing in a detailed but accessible way what can be accomplished using the Reggio approach.

Teachers at the summer workshop say they came to learn new ways to draw young people into creative activities and when to step in to help when children are trying to solve a problem on their own.

Ramsey says such skills are key. His PhD research found that children who engage in "critical symbolic play" with found materials are more cognitively advanced than those who spend time playing solely on an outdoor climbing structure, for instance.

CHILDREN USE "100 LANGUAGES" TO EXPRESS THEIR IDEAS

The Reggio Emilia framework was introduced in Italy shortly after the fall of Fascism and the end of World War II, when a group of local women in the villages around the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia created their own preschool. Italian psychologist Loris Malaguzzi was impressed by the system, and he helped develop and expand the network of schools, initially called the People's Schools. He refined its student-centered educational pedagogy, based on principles of respect, responsibility, and community, through exploration. The pedagogy uses a self-guided curriculum.

Malaguzzi set forth this educational philosophy in his book *The Hundred Languages of Children*. The title reflects the belief that children are endowed with 100 languages, like painting and drama, that can be used to express their ideas.

The Wonder of Learning **is a self-guided exhibition on display at BU's Fenway Campus through November 15.**

The Reggio approach teaches early educators how to use those languages to help children realize their full potential.

Today there are more than 30 municipal educational centers in Reggio Emilia, serving children three months to five years old year-round from 7 am to 7 pm. The program is funded through tax dollars. And the town of 130,000 routinely draws teachers—and not just early childhood teachers, but elementary, middle, and high school teachers—from around the world, who come to learn about the educational philosophy.

"It's sort of the mecca of early childhood education," says Stephanie Cox Suárez, a Wheelock clinical associate professor of special and elementary education and an expert on Reggio Emilia teaching methods.

"There's so much pressure today, with scripted curriculums and standards and guidelines for teachers, whether they're in public or private education," Suárez says. "Teachers want to break away from that and see how they can let children's interests be first."

The self-guided *Wonder of Learning* exhibition shows educators a world of sun-drenched preschools, where teachers are skilled in the nuances of letting children safely follow their innate sense of curiosity. One display shows how young students visiting a museum are drawn to the sounds shoes make in a stairwell. Teachers and artists, or "atelieristas," coteaching the class use that interest as a springboard to study rhythms, draw different styles of shoes, from slippers to clogs, and talk with children about the sounds they make.

The exhibition also includes images of the Gianni Rodari Center, a sun-splashed room for 24- to 30-month-olds with a wall of windows. The architecture is intentionally designed to let in the changing light. "These constant variations create scenarios that make children marvel," the exhibition notes, "inviting them to new exploration and opportunities for knowing."

Such thinking has inspired at least 30 different Reggio networks around the world, the one in Boston among them, and was the foundation for the Blue School, a preschool in New York cofounded by members of the Blue Man Group for their own children.

The Boston-area Reggio network lobbied for years to bring the exhibition back to the city (it had been here once before, in 1981). Funding came from a variety of sources, including the Barr Foundation, the Boston Foundation, and Charlestown Nursery School, making it possible for attendees to participate in workshops and discussions at little or no cost. One Boston University faculty member even donated $20,000 to support the exhibition.

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