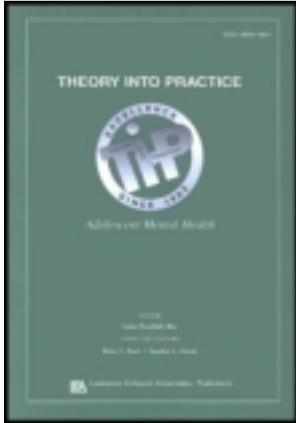


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Theory Into Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/htip20>

Linking Past to Present to Create an Image of the Child

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Version of record first published: 13 Oct 2009.

To cite this article: Eileen Hughes (2007): Linking Past to Present to Create an Image of the Child, Theory Into Practice, 46:1, 48-56

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405840709336548>

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Eileen Hughes

Linking Past to Present to Create an Image of the Child

Principles of the Reggio Emilia approach are a catalyst for thinking about practices in early childhood education. Teachers in the child care system of Reggio Emilia encourage us to think about our image of childhood and the ways we interact with children, plan curriculum, and design environments. This article examines experiences in a rural Alaskan Head Start program and the initial steps to identify an image of the children in their program. How do we connect principles of the Reggio Emilia approach within our own cultural context? How do we start rethinking our image of children in our own classrooms? These questions are addressed in the remote Cup'ik village of Chevak, Alaska. The author derives general guidelines from the Chevak experience that will be useful for other programs seeking to discern the meaning of childhood for their particular cultural context.

THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES the initial process that an Alaskan Head Start program em-

ployed to interpret the aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Gandini & Edwards, 2001) concerning how to observe children's actions to construct an image of the children. This is not about how a program was transformed, but rather the importance of looking at traditions and history to create a starting place for change that focuses on discerning the meaning of childhood particular to the cultural context.

Background

Chevak, a Cup'ik Eskimo village located in a remote area of Alaska, is home to approximately 500 people and one of only two remaining Cup'ik villages. Historically, daily activities in Chevak synchronize with the changing of the seasons. In the past, fish camps and berry gathering dominated activities in summer, whereas winter meant hunting fur animals, followed by the spring hunt for seal in the Bering Sea. As in many Alaskan villages, the people in Chevak struggle between preserving their cultural values and traditions and integrating Western beliefs.

The Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc. (RurALCAP) administers Head Start programs across rural communities, serving primarily Native Alaskan children. The Chevak Head

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Start program serves the Cup'ik village and is a comprehensive child development program serving young children and their families. Raised in Chevak, Teresa Pingayak, the RurALCAP regional coordinator, has a strong sense of respect and pride for her village. Our first encounters focused on sharing my interpretations of the elements of the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards et al., 1998) and exploration of its connections with the cultural context of the Chevak Head Start program. Further work in Chevak meant that I would function in several roles of listener, participant, learner, facilitator, and teacher.

Following our brief introduction in Anchorage, Teresa traveled to Ohio and Chicago to learn about the Reggio Emilia approach in the United States. Although I initially questioned the extent to which Teresa's interpretation from other contexts would offer linkage to the cultural context in Chevak, my concerns were unfounded. Teresa readily formed connections to teachers' work from both Ohio and Chicago. It was meaningful to her that the children were respected as observers, that there was a deep regard for the natural environment, and that programs represented meaningful relationships with the families. A fundamental principle of the Reggio Emilia approach is the view of school as an organization of systems that support the many levels of relationship among children, teachers, family, and community (Edwards et al., 1998). Although not clearly articulated at the time, elements of the Reggio Emilia approach were consistent with beliefs held in Chevak. Teresa observed how programs in the Chicago Commons Head Start programs created an identity that represented a relationship to their community, such as history panels in the entry halls highlighting community assets (Haigh, 2004b). Time has changed the subsistence lifestyle in Chevak, which has also influenced the education of children. Teresa, like other native Alaskans, wanted to see a meaningful educational system that preserves the rich cultural heritage and came home eager to inspire her staff. Recently, American educators have been encouraged to rethink teaching roles and practices that might lead to a new image of childhood in our country (New, 2000). Consequently, a question was raised that would guide the Chevak teach-

ers' experiences: Could the Reggio Emilia approach be a catalyst to rethink teaching practices in Chevak?

Beginnings: Starting the Dialogue

Six months after Teresa's visits to Reggio-inspired schools, a meeting was held in Anchorage attended by RurALCAP Head Start administrators, Teresa, teachers, and myself. We met for several hours and recorded our discussion as the teachers focused their conversation on the meaning of village life for children. On several occasions, Teresa voiced that she wanted to see the Chevak Head Start program be more culturally responsive.

The teachers were quick to state that growing up in the village today is very different from their own childhood. Teresa remembered that as a child she had "lived in harmony with the environment." She described her rich experiences and noted that she and her peers "didn't have a lot of what kids see today." She stated that, "Our parents trusted us, and we were free to explore." She noted, "They [children] are more confused now." Rose and Helen, older teachers in the program, agreed and commented that they would be gone from "morning to evening, exploring the tundra." Teresa continued, "We had one language: our own language." This initial discussion started a process for constructing a collective view of childhood. The staff felt that changes in the village have influenced both the ways that children are growing up and the meaning of education. The introduction of Western cultural values and educational systems have contributed to the changing lifestyle and the loss of traditional knowledge. Themes from the discussion included the following: the loss of the children's relationship to the environment, the loss of Cup'ik traditional ways, the loss of cultural heritage, and the loss of relationships that the children had with family.

Rinaldi (2001) explained that society plays a role in the creation of traditions, rights, and expectations that become reflected in the organization of our educational systems. She posed insightful questions for educators to consider:

Who is the child? What is childhood? Does childhood simply exist, or do we create it? Does each society create its image of childhood and of its child? How does a child learn? What is the meaning of to educate? Are infant-toddler centers and schools in general a preparation for life, or are they part of life? (p. 50)

These questions are fundamental to the creation of the powerful image of the child as held by the Italian preschools of Reggio Emilia. Children are viewed as having ideas, questions, and theories, and the strengths of children are assumed. How could the Chevak classrooms offer a place for teachers to create a new image of childhood by recognizing the children's potential and their unique contributions?

**Revisiting Childhood:
Linking the Past to the Present**

As it was important that I continue to observe, listen, question, and to learn the teachers' beliefs as it related to my own understanding, I requested that all staff members paint a representation of their childhood. The teachers took their time, pausing to think about their past, and quietly concentrated on representing their memories. The teachers shared their representations and the teacher's ideas were recorded. Marita shared her painting, depicting the loss of the story knife, a Cup'ik tradition. A story knife, or *Yarruin*, was used to draw stories in the dirt and was one means to pass on stories to future generations about daily life and the role of traditional knowledge. Marita captured the fading memories for how the story knife was made and the role of storytelling in relationship to family and village life:

Me and my sister we were using story knives, Yarruin ... make story knives out of those ... Those steel thing [sic] ... We cut it out and go to cement and try to make a really good story knife ... But the story knife I notice when it disappearing ... My sister and her friends when they getting older [sic], it was fading ... I missed it.



Figure 1. Teresa and Helen paint next to each other.

Teresa and Helen, who were older than several of the teachers, painted their pictures next to each other (see Figure 1) and noted that as children their families shared fish camp "side by side."

Teresa shared fond memories of village life which once relied on subsistence living. The tundra was her playground that she explored with her best childhood friend. Their play closely tied to the subsistence lifestyle of their parents:

This is my best friend ... we always used to be out on the tundra ... Those are handmade baskets. Her and I used to make our own grass baskets ... She went out and found some eggs [crane] And there are a lot of birds on that tundra, and everything was outdoors, and a lot of the kids would go out on the tundra ... We just stay out there all day.

Helen shared her memory on the tundra, recalling the experience with her mother. Like Teresa, her memory of her childhood experience related to activities revolving around the outdoor environment:

This is me and my mom egg hunting ... We used to wear Quaspeq (cloth parka) ... When I walked next to my mom and looking at her and the length of it, my Quaspeq was a little bit lower than her Quaspeq. So that used to make me think that I was bigger than my mom.

Embedded in Teresa's and Helen's dialogue were memories of childhood when the village was

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considered a safe place for children to explore, and personal anecdotes exemplified the connection and respect of the people for the environment.

Rose's childhood memory, as she described the making of *akutaq* (Eskimo ice cream) with her mother, suggests the use of observation as an educational method that has been identified as one means that Native Alaskans use to pass on knowledge.

Christine's representation of her childhood memory highlighted the strong role of extended family. She remembered the role of "Eskimo songs" that carried traditions.

The teachers' descriptions of their memories reflected a lifestyle that was determined by the seasons, where children enjoyed hours in the outdoors and strong relationships among families were critical. Thus, the teacher's representations gave insights into the important cultural values.

Articulating Beliefs and Creating an Image of the Child

The teachers' memories of their own childhoods were the starting places for identifying beliefs. When speaking about the image of childhood, Rinaldi (2001) believed that society and schools can construct images of childhood that will encourage or diminish children's desire to learn. The fond memories of the teachers' childhoods centered on community, strong relationships among family members, connections with the outdoor environment, and traditional knowledge.

The painters' descriptions helped them to identify important beliefs. The teachers generated a list of 14 beliefs expressing values of the past that related to family, life in the outdoors, traditional knowledge, and their knowledge of children at the present time. Some of the beliefs included the following:

- We believe that children should be keepers of history.
- We believe that children should know and have arts and crafts (basketry, beading, etc.) and they should know about the grasses and other materials of the crafts.

- We believe that children should have connections with the environment and people.
- We believe that children should experience nature.
- We believe that children should know about the importance of their own ideas.
- We believe that children should know about fishing.

Educators in the United States who have been inspired by the Reggio approach (Cadwell, 2003; Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Fu, Stremmel, & Hill, 2002; Hendrick, 2004), and who have sustained the journey of creating a strong image of children, have engaged in reflective teaching practices that require teachers to view themselves as researchers (Fyfe, 1998; Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). Professional development is aligned with the study of teachers' questions as they examine their own classrooms (Miller & Shoptaugh, 2004). Thus, the generation of collective beliefs was an initial step, moving staff to question how their beliefs are visible in their teaching practices.

At this point, the teachers were stopped to examine beliefs that already existed in their teaching practices. One of the valuable lessons we can learn from the Reggio Emilia approach is the translation of theory and values to teaching practices that are reflective of one's own unique cultural context (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Haigh, 2004a; Lewin-Benham, 2006). On one of the classroom walls hung beautiful enlarged photographs of faces of the children with family members represented in the Chevak Head Start program. We discussed how the photographs represented the teachers' belief that children should have connections with the environment and people. The size of the photographs and the display of the children with a parent, uncle, or grandmother created a striking visual representation of the connections that existed in the village among the children and their families.

Next Steps: Connecting Beliefs With Curriculum

Taking the beliefs about the children to the next step meant that teachers must look closely at the

children's actions to construct an image of the children that was related to their beliefs. Earlier in the year, the teachers received a digital camera and took photographs, posting a few of them. Walking the children on the tundra, the teachers asked, "What do you like about your village?" The photographs of the walk were posted with comments such as the following: "play with bike," "we go camping to eat," "just play around." The display prompted the question, "What are the children experiencing that represents the changing community?" The continued importance of fish camp to the subsistence lifestyle might be embedded in the child's comment about going to "fish camp to eat." "Just play around" may or may not have a different connotation than what was experienced by the teachers in their childhood.

The teachers had a starting place for using observations to understand the children's interests and questions (Cadwell & Fyfe, 2004). The teachers' desire to use the camera prompted me to offer questions that could extend the use of the camera to study the children's actions and words (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Oken-Wright & Gravett, 2002). Ultimately, the goal at the time was to use observations to better plan the curriculum (Forman & Fyfe, 1998; Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). One of the underlying principles of the Reggio Emilia approach is the image of the teacher as a researcher who engages in a cycle of inquiry (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001) who forms questions, observes, documents children's actions and words, and collaborates with other teachers. As part of creating an image of children, the teachers would be studying ways to extend their use of photographs and observations. My role with the teachers was to capture experiences that might provide them with ways to study both the children and themselves as observers.

Frozen Ice: Observing the Elements

The children and teachers walked outside to the lake to explore the frozen water on a chilly November day (see Figure 2). The children held hands as they approached the solid ice. Few words were spoken; however, their actions showed how the children noticed the ice beneath their feet.



Figure 2. Walking out together.

They walked slowly. They slid across the ice. They stooped to touch the ice. Helen, the oldest teacher, pointed out subtleties in the ice: "Look at the grass under the ice. Look at how the ice sticks up." Chevak does not have trees or massive mountains. However, this village is rich with its terrain of tundra, requiring an astute observer to notice the smallest of changes. Helen's comments suggested the ways that the environment invited close observations of nature. Pingayak (1998) explained that in the past, hunters needed to have a "mental map" of the land for a 50- to 100-mile radius. This meant reading the discrete details of the geography and weather patterns of the land and bodies of water. Helen shared her observational skills, slowing down the children to notice the formations, as she pointed out other characteristics in the ice: "There is a crack. There are bubbles in the ice." As Helen tried to focus attention to the formations in the ice, the children looked at the objects left (bike, bottle, coins) from the previous season.

In Pingayak's (1998) curriculum guide, *The Cup'ik People of the Western Tundra: A Curriculum*, reference is made to predictions of Cup'ik wise men before the arrival of White men. One of the stories passed down is "shining particles that would appear on the tundra." It is suggested that Cup'ik ancestors forecasted the introduction of items such as glass, aluminum, and other metals that today are very much part of village life. The contrasts of the changing village were evident in many ways. The frozen ice that shared its habitat

with the natural grasses and foreign materials was one of the visible marks of the changing times.

This experience offered the opportunity to relate our observations to the teachers' stated beliefs. We discussed the concept of "keepers of history." Helen could offer her history and traditional knowledge of earlier years in the village. We discussed that outdoor experiences like the one on the lake served to extend the children's understanding about aspects of the outdoor environment, such as how to read the ice. The concept of respect, an important value in the Cup'ik culture, might be introduced and connected to the story of the "shining particles that appeared on the tundra." Back in the classroom, the story might be shared as a way to introduce the situation the children found at the lake. The use of oral stories and legends created in the child's culture is very important to the preservation of the traditional knowledge. There are only a few examples in the literature noting the ways that teachers interpret the concept of the 100 languages (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) as applied to Native American children (Fraser & Gestwick, 2002; Hughes, 2005). Experiences like this might offer an opportunity to introduce authentic languages, such as storytelling, to convey traditional knowledge.

Overall, the experience on the ice allowed the teachers to study how to connect their beliefs to teaching practices, and to consider a process for using observations to plan subsequent experiences in the curriculum (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Hughes, 2002).

Children and Teachers Revisit the Experience

Following the experience on the frozen water, the children gathered in small groups to draw their observations. The concept of observational drawing was new for both the teachers and the children. Ernestine understood that she needed to scaffold the children, so she started to draw her own observations, telling them, "I am going to make a lake ... This is the ice. Remember what the color the ice was ... Gray ... White ... Brown." She labeled the many colors of the ice, suggesting that there

are many types of ice, which is characteristic of this region in Alaska. Pingayak (1998) explained that for seal hunters, it is important to read the meaning of the colors of ice because observing the landmarks of ice will prevent fatal accidents.

The next day, the teachers studied the photographs and noted that they allowed them to study actions of which they were unaware in the midst of interacting with the children. The teachers looked at their own actions and words and reflected on their interactions. Thus, the experience with the frozen lake was an invitation for the teachers to think more deeply about the purposes of their outdoor experiences with children.

Summary

One of the greatest contributions from the educators of Reggio Emilia is the promotion of discussion, reflection, and examination of beliefs and values that are translated into teaching practices (New, 2000). When teachers are serious in their study of the Reggio Emilia approach, they optimize the opportunity to question and to examine the underlying principles of this approach and apply their understanding to their own unique early childhood education program. Programs that have sustained policies and practices as a result of their interpretation of the Reggio Emilia approach have created learning communities that invite long-term inquiry in their schools, rather than replicating a skill set of modeled practices (Cadwell, 2003; Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Hendrick, 2004). Research partnerships between children and teachers are formed and promote a collaborative learning environment and support a healthy network of relationships in the school.

Consistent with other programs that have been inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, the Chevak Head Start staff started a dialogue to question their understanding of their own teaching practices. The teachers had unique issues particular to their village Head Start program; however, the ways the staff approached their interpretation of the Reggio Emilia principles can be shared with other programs.

First, teachers of the Head Start program placed value on revisiting the history of their village to examine the context of their current teaching practices. Educators of Reggio Emilia stress the importance of understanding the historical and sociocultural context of a community that can influence the ways that teachers view children and ultimately interact with children (Rinaldi, 2001). This notion was particularly important to the Chevak Head Start program that wished to preserve the native heritage where understanding the past is important to redefining current educational practices. To identify an image of children, the teachers looked back to the days of childhood when they were children. The village of Chevak has a rich heritage that respects the many levels of relationships among people with a strong connection to the community. Villagers understand how the past ways are fading and outside influences are changing childrearing practices and redefining childhood in Chevak. The teachers wanted to ensure that aspects of the past will still be present to preserve healthy relationships. Making these ideas visible through the statement of beliefs is a reference point for constructing the current image. This was a critical step in the process of reflecting on the importance of history and culture that influences the identity of an early childhood program. Different programs will prioritize different beliefs and examine their understanding of an image of children that will guide their unique practices. For the Chevak Head Start program, and perhaps for other Native American cultures where traditions are fading, it is important to identify past traditional beliefs that can be interpreted and sustained in authentic teaching practices that honor and respect the uniqueness of a particular context (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Hughes, 2005).

A second lesson learned in the Chevak experience was to observe and understand the possibilities for connecting the physical and cultural environment to the Head Start curriculum. In Chevak, the possibilities of creating a curriculum related to elements of the natural world were endless. Some may characterize this region as harsh or barren; however, close examination reveals quite the opposite. Chevak is a village surrounded by the natural elements, and through attentive observation

one can identify the many formations of ice, the many sounds of wind, or the many shades of gray. It is an environment that projects its own unique beauty and requires respect for its harsh elements. One of the key features of the Reggio Emilia's early childhood programs includes the role of the environment as teacher (Gandini, 1998). Natural materials, aesthetics, connections with the outdoor environment, and a sense of well-being are emphasized in the design of the environment and curriculum (Gandini, 1998). Aspects of this concept can be connected to the study of science that promotes inquiry and imagination and connects children to the outdoor world (Cadwell, 2003; Malaguzzi, 1998). Teresa was initially inspired by teachers from Ohio and Chicago in the ways the teachers worked with children on projects that evolved from experiences in the natural world. Despite living in different types of geographic areas, the Head Start teachers in Chevak, like the teachers in the Chicago Commons Head Start program, believed that nature is important to the curriculum for young children (Haigh, 2004b). In Chevak, where subsistence living is still a way of life, respect for the natural environment, the connection of science and imagination, and the role of the child as an observer in the outdoors were ideas that resonated with the teachers. In cultures where the outdoor environment is still important to the lifestyle that is dependent on such things as hunting, gathering, or fishing, a curriculum for young children that can promote observation and harmony with the natural elements seems not only appropriate but necessary. The classroom environment could be the "third educator" (Gandini, 1998, p. 177) that supports the preservation of the history of this region and encourages children to observe the environmental elements that characterize this region during the changing seasons.

A third lesson that can be shared with others is the value of looking for strengths, possibilities, and resources among the early childhood staff. The in-depth documentation processes of the Reggio Emilia approach (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001) that makes visible the children's strengths, ideas, and potential can be also applied to staff members (Project Zero, Cambridgeport Children's Center, Ezra H. Baker School, John Simpkins

School, 2002). By documenting the teacher's ideas, actions, and questions, and making public the learning processes of children and teachers, the staff can become collaborative researchers. Thus, as Bredekamp (1993) explained, "the teacher's role derives from and cannot be separated from the image of the child" (p. 16). The ongoing professional development that occurs in the process is critical to sustaining learning communities that function using the strengths of the staff. The reflective processes that are embedded in using documentation as a tool supports teachers in looking for children's strengths, ideas, theories, and learning strategies that allow adults to construct respectful learning groups (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). The educators of Reggio Emilia have offered an in-depth means for teachers to document learning processes to construct a shared understanding which offers meaningful professional development that inspires teachers to continue to remain in the field of early childhood education. It is the people who live in a program who will ultimately be responsible for making change. Because the Chevak Head Start program is remote and travel to Chevak is only by small plane or snow machine, the teachers must rely on each other as resources.

A fourth lesson was the need to record stories rather than the snapshots or single moments of the children's experiences. The staff limited their use of photographs by capturing a skill, or isolated action. It was difficult to know the significance of the children's actions or to fully comprehend the value of the experience. The stories needed to identify the potential of the children so that teachers could construct an understanding of the image of the child as an observer of nature, a keeper of history, and one who is full of important ideas. American educators are learning about the ways to use documentation to support the planning of experiences for children and as a strategy for professional development (Miller & Shoptaugh, 2004). It was suggested that the weekly staff meeting be used in a different way. In Reggio-inspired programs, teachers have placed value on time spent with colleagues to study documentation (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Hendrick, 2004). During the time allocated for weekly meetings, teachers

could share a story from their photographs that could serve as a first step to engage in the study of observations.

The Chevak Head Start teachers, by sharing a common vision, embarked on the initial steps of a journey. Travel in Alaska can often lead us into terrain that is not defined. A journey into the study of the Reggio Emilia approach may lack defined markers and educators must define their own direction and identify their own resources to navigate the journey. The journey will offer new directions that may lead to new places bringing gifts of the past. To use Pingayak's (1998) words, Chevak presents a region of "hardship and enjoyment" (p. 7). These same contrasting concepts might be applied to describe the journey that allows each of us to rethink our early childhood teaching practices. We can share with our colleagues in other parts of Alaska, the lower 48 states, and the world, our joys, challenges, and common visions in our efforts to improve early childhood education for all children.

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