



**Community Conversation Reflection  
Reggio-Inspired Network of Minnesota  
July 14, 2013**

by Christy Spencer, in dialogue with Tami Eshult, Joanne Esser, Rie Gilsdorf, Patti Loftus and Lani Shapiro

The **Community Conversation** was convened around the question: *What is the ‘it’ that makes work Reggio-inspired?* A community of parents, teachers and citizens gathered to think together about this intriguing question. But it would be a mistake to imagine that this was the first step in this process. The conversation was connected to and built on a series of recent events. The Network and the University of Minnesota Lab School hosted an event last March called, **“Enter, Encounter, Engage”**. A reflection on that event raised some compelling questions, and those questions led to the convening of this thinking group. The Community Conversation was structured for us to practice engaging in actions that are associated with Reggio thought: to *listen, participate, document and reflect*.



We posed questions that challenged our own thinking, rooted in philosophical underpinnings of Reggio practice. This community conversation was a space for us, as adults, to engage in a process that parallels the one we try to introduce to children: to structure encounters that call for further investigation; to invite collaboration; to work in different modalities, to bring a researcher's mindset; to pose high quality questions that challenge assumptions; to take risks; and to assume failure is a new opportunity.

What resonated with me after leaving the conversation was the question that Nan Kari raised during the debrief: Were the conversations amiable or did they surface tensions? Were we able to challenge each other's assumptions, offer diverse points of view or experience conflict as useful? That left me wondering, how DO we make space to invite productive tension into our conversations? What does that look like? Tension carries a negative connotation, but in this context it can have a more constructive role. Together, we asked, "How do we re-cast tension as an asset? How might tension begin to serve as a lucrative resource, a catalyst for further growth and learning?"

Members of the planning group gathered to review the ideas that had surfaced in our small group discussions, each examining the traces from a unique point of view.



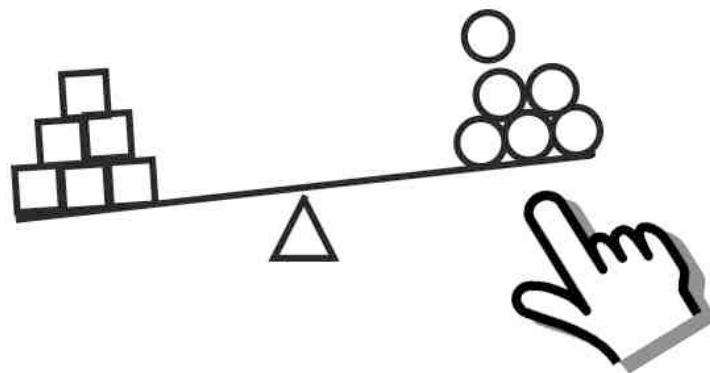
We brought together all the notes, comments and reflections we had collected, looking for themes and trends.

Together the Conversation participants described, named or asked questions about the following:

- Reflective practice: being genuinely curious
  - Observing, listening, questioning, and documenting
- Relationships: respect, participation and collaboration
  - Image of the child, role of the teacher, role the families
  - The importance of communication
- Environment and materials as rich resources

- Projects, using 100 Languages
- Time
  - to move slowly with participants
  - to collaborate, document and reflect
- Openness
  - Question dominant narratives
  - Flexibility
- Richness in ordinary moments

We've found ourselves trying to answer the question "What is the *it*?" with a static definition, but we're reminded the 'IT' is a **dynamic process that is constantly changing**.



One of the most persistent themes that emerged was BALANCE of various kinds: between individual and group, organization and flexibility, responsiveness to children and administration, structure (control) and openness, observation and participation, listening and leading. When we welcome a bit of imbalance or disequilibrium, productive tensions arise which offer the possibility of new thinking. This challenges both individuals and the collective to practice balancing various interests, concerns and perspectives. The underpinnings of Reggio thought highlight the iterative, collaborative, and visible nature of this process, which is both creative and public.

As you reflect on the broader question "what is the 'it' that makes work Reggio-inspired," we invite you to consider some of these more specific questions in your own context. What shifts need to occur in your environment that will allow you to welcome tension into the dialogue? Where are you currently experiencing imbalance or disequilibrium? And further, how might these tensions and imbalances serve as a catalyst for growth within your individual and collective practice?

***"The Reggio Emilia approach is possible where there is nothing, provided there is respect, listening, and time."***

Thanks to all the folks who worked before, during and after the Community Conversation...

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