Get to the Point(e):
Dancing between the Reggio Philosophy, Culturally Relevant Teaching, and Trauma- Informed Care

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Prologue

The childhood dream of becoming a ballerina is ubiquitous among young children. The allure of tutus, tiaras, princes, villains, and fairytales captures the imagination of minds that thrive in fantasy words. By five, I was one of those children. I remember stepping into a ballet studio for the first time; I was immediately hooked. The long, smooth ballet barres, the mirrors wrapping around the walls, and expansive floors all called me to dance. I was a free and creative spirit as a young child, but I soon entered a world of rigor, rules, and the striving for perfection.

Certain aspects of this world came naturally for me. I had an innate understanding of music, and my energy and enthusiasm matched the athleticism found in steps across the floor. There were also very real challenges. It can be a constant comparison game between students; teachers often were more "tough" in the "tough love" approach, and time in the studio dictated a level of obedience more extreme than my public elementary school. Yet, just like that first magical moment in the studio, I felt called to dance. Countless sweaty hours in the studio, time spent worrying over steps of choreography, and far too many pairs of pointe shoes prepared me to audition for collegiate ballet programs at 18, in hopes of embarking on a professional career upon graduation.

While at Indiana University-Bloomington, my dancing demands increased as well as the performance opportunities. For me, finding my place in the ballet department was an upward battle. My peers were immensely talented, just as hardworking, and at times, more skilled at advocating for themselves and their abilities. Throughout my time at IU, I experienced the peaks and valleys of the life of a dancer. There were rehearsals and performances which felt transcendent, immediately followed by exhaustion, injury, and self-doubt. However, throughout my time in this program, I had the fortune of being a ballet instructor with the community children. I never expected stepping into the role of a teacher at 19 to be so impactful a decade later.

I started small. I co-taught a beginning ballet class with a classmate where we alternated preparing combinations for the young students to dance, in collaboration with a piano student who accompanied us. We were both nervous with this undertaking, but we soon found our rhythm. I also began working with the Creative Movement program where children three to six learned the basics of movement, ballet, and self-expression through their bodies. Those hours on Saturday mornings became the most precious time for me during college. I marveled at the joy and freedom I witnessed with those young dancers. In a way, it took me back to how I felt at that age—uninhibited, fully experiencing life.

Upon graduating, I accepted a position with Saint Louis Ballet where I would remain dancing for a year and a half. Again, I felt the soaring highs of an amazing performance and the devastating lows of the toll this career took on my body and soul. I ended up abruptly leaving mid-contract to return home to Pittsburgh and reclaim myself outside of ballet. It was a gut-wrenching decision, but ultimately, it was the decision that changed my life's course for the better.

When faced with the question "what next," I drew upon my experiences with children to start working as a paraprofessional. That same spark of wonder I felt with my creative movement students was ignited, and I learned how to show up for these students on the job. While it was not a linear path, I realized that this passion for being with young children was not a fleeting interest. I landed a job at Carnegie Mellon University's Cyert Center where I worked with children birth through six within the framework of the Reggio philosophy. I felt my engines firing at all levels. My head was filled with new ideas from mentors and readings on the philosophy, and my heart was bursting with the first opportunity that felt like home since leaving the stage.

Soon after starting at Cyert, I knew I desired and needed more education, which lead me to Carlow University's Early Childhood MEd program. I began the program part-time to maintain my focus as an educator at Cyert. With the onset of COVID, my job security was at risk, and I was later furloughed. While initially, this set me into a panic, it afforded me the opportunity to look beyond what I knew. A Pre-K position at Carlow's Lab School opened up, and I jumped at the opportunity to apply. I was offered the job, and I will hit my one year job anniversary when I submit this paper.

So why does this background in ballet matter? Is it relevant? That is something I have continuously reflected on during my time in student-facing work. Ultimately, I do think it matters. The work ethic and tenacity I developed as a dancer has informed the level of commitment I expect of myself in the classroom. In a strange way, the immediate feedback loop I held onto during my dancing days is analogous in the classroom. When dancing, it is typically clear if a movement is working, either by your own sensation, the results with a partner, or feedback from a person in power. Similarly, as a teacher of young children, there are often results and reactions rather quickly. At times, it is a positive result. However, even in the moments that a lesson or behavioral intervention goes awry, there is still important information to glean. At the same time, there are very poignant differences between my experiences as a dancer and thus far as a teacher. When dancing, the strict code of conduct was stifling to my personality and voice as an intelligent woman. In contrast, working in early childhood has enabled me to embrace my voice, intellect, and individuality in this new role.

All this is to say, my ballet training and experiences are still with me. Most notably, this love and knowledge of the arts forged a strong connection with the Reggio philosophy. When this piece of my story came up in discussions for this paper, Maria Piantanida challenged me to find a way to weave ballet into this paper, so I decided to do just that. The title itself alludes to a dance metaphor, as well as the organization of the paper. As the paper unfolds in chapters, there will be a quote from prolific members of the ballet community connecting to the theme of the chapter. These quotes come from people I have actually encountered during my career or have been a source of inspiration through their words and contributions to the field. If my experience of stepping into early childhood has taught me anything, it has empowered me to integrate all pieces of me into my work to better connect, support, and inspire the children I am fortunate to work with.

Chapter 1: The Curtain Rises

"The Dance is an art because it demands vocation, knowledge, and ability"
August Bournonville

August Bounonville was a prolific Danish choreographer and teacher. He systemized ballet technique in a series of classes where the mastery of steps contributed to more complex sequence as weeks and months progressed. During my time at IU, our program hosted a feisty Danish teacher, who shared these historic methods and choreography with us. The organization of steps highlighted athletic muscle energy in the legs juxtaposed with a calm, poised carriage of the upper body. I was a sophomore at the time, eager to gain opportunities at any moment. Certain steps of the choreography came naturally for a dancer like me with a strong jump. While I had much to learn about the carriage of my arms and back, this natural inclination gave me a soaring sensation on stage when I performed one of the Bournonville ballets.

Just as there are individuals who are natural dancers, some people walk into student-facing work with an innate understanding. There can be this undefined magic, just how dancers have that spark during performances. However, without the technique, there isn't the substance to meet the expectations of the craft—in both ballet and education. When I began working with children, I relied heavily on that performance spark, as if I was assuming a new role. Yet, just like how my career in ballet necessitated years of intense training, I needed the knowledge of best practices and professional mentors to truly develop into an educator.

While at Cyert, I was grateful to be under the wings of several veteran teachers in the field and in the Reggio philosophy. These educators led by example, offered thoughtful critique, and provided support as I gained momentum in my practice. For example I remember sharing an idea of using fruit as a stamp for paint. A seasoned educator gently explained that food was never used for tools or in creative expression to be respectful of communities who are food insecure. Alongside these organic professional moments, I was concurrently taking courses at Carlow for my M.Ed. That synergistic energy between theory and practice was powerful in a way I did not anticipate.

During my academic courses at Carlow, I found myself compelled first by Trauma- Informed Practice. Threads of this framework were woven throughout several courses, and in a February 2020 day-long conference centered on Trauma and mindfulness in the classroom. As a person with a mental health and trauma history, this subject was of both personal and professional interest. Just a few months later, our country was forced to reckon with the violent history of white supremacy, police brutality, and the systematic oppression of BIPOC individuals. In response, the field of education continued to take a closer look into Eurocentric practices, the school to prison pipeline, and how classroom environments can be dangerous to non-white students. Likely fueled by my own white fragility, examining how to create an inclusive and positive space became a focus for me.

During this past school year, I strived to do just that in my classroom. These children represented differences including language, culture, race, family structure, ability, as well as neuro-divergence. In many ways, these differences allowed deeper connections, as we worked through difficult conversations and misunderstandings. While I was not fully aware at the time, the way I showed up for my classroom and these children was informed by three pillars. First, my commitment to implementing the Reggio philosophy was a guiding light. This ebbed and flowed based on the needs of the children, but it was a continuous, driving force. Second, Trauma-Informed care provided the framework to be responsive to a few children with troubling experiences. Finally, applying what I understood about Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in classroom moments seemed to contribute to all children feeling a sense of agency.

What I'm realizing is that this is the lens through which I approach my work with children. These values are the pillars which build a positive and inclusive environment for learning based on my knowledge and experiences thus far. Therefore, the intent of this study is to increase my theoretical understanding of the relationship between the Reggio philosophy, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Trauma-Informed care and how these theoretical connections can inform how I approach my work in early childhood education. The guiding questions that led this process are:

- *What aspects of the Reggio philosophy do I value as an early childhood educator?*
- *What do I mean by Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Trauma-Informed Care?*
- *Why are both of these important to my work as an early childhood educator?*
- *How have I synthesized my understanding of these concepts into a coherent philosophy to guide my practice as an early childhood educator?*

Chapter 2: The Whole and Competent Child

"You were once wild here. Don't let them tame you."
Isadora Duncan

Isadora Duncan is considered to be the mother of modern dance. Duncan was a renegade within traditional artistic circles and embodied a spirit of liberation in her movement style during the turn of the 20th century. My knowledge and reverence for this artist was solidified by writing my first real research paper in high school. Descriptions of her dancing capture a free, almost child-like movement quality demonstrating how dance could return to its more organic roots. Much like this free dancing style, children enter the world with an innate curiosity. Young children's minds are primed for inquiry and discovery when their surroundings support this tendency. While one might view this energy as "wild" as Duncan describes, the child truly shows the world who they are, what excites them, and all the competencies they bring forth. Thankfully, the Reggio Philosophy is designed to uplift the innate abilities of children.

The Reggio Philosophy has its roots as Italy recovered from the aftermath WWII. The original school buildings of the early childhood centers in Reggio came out of the ashes of the war-torn land, making way for a hopeful view of the future (Edwards et al., 1995, p. 28). In contrast to other educational philosophies, like Montessori or Waldorf, this philosophy's name comes from the city in which it was born, Reggio-Emilia. During a pedagogical discussion with Allison Mahler, Executive Direct of the Boulder Journey School, Mahler emphasized this point making the argument that naming a philosophy after a place was both unique and telling of the nature of this way of thinking (A. Mahler, personal communication, June 2021). The evolution of this approach cannot be separated from the context in which it developed. That being said, educational pioneer Loris Malaguzzi is known as the founder of this philosophy, in partnership with the many children, teachers, and families from those humble, beginning days. As quoted by Edwards, Malaguzzi believed "history can be changed, and is changed by taking possession of it, starting with the destiny of the children" (Edwards et all., 1995, p. 28). As Italy worked to redefine itself in the years following WWII, many people, such as Malaguzzi, recognized the real power in investing in future generations. Malaguzzi's words reveals his view of the child—active in their own education and inherently worthy of rights as a citizen. Years later, the National Association for the Education of Young Children echoed these sentiments in a position paper arguing for children's access to the full rights of citizenship from the early years (Advancing Equity). Yet, in a practical sense, fully embracing the rights and abilities of young children is challenging for the adults alongside their journey.

Julianne Wurm's 2005 work entitled W*orking in the Reggio Way* explores how American educators can translate Reggio practices to their own classrooms. Any implementation of the philosophy outside of Reggio, Italy must be considered Reggio-inspired to honor the roots and context of the philosophy. Wurm shares that "In Reggio the child is viewed as strong, powerful, rich in potential, driven by the power of wanting to grow, and nurtured by adults who take this drive towards growth seriously" (2005, p.16). While in the United Sates, there is often an emphasis to control and standardized education from the beginning, with the child having a less active role in this process. During discussion with past and present colleagues, I have seen how even minor changes in practice or systems communicate a stronger view of the child, such as allowing children free access to the bathroom or a greater level of choice in how the day is organized (Wurm, 2005). Holding the child in such a competent light is incredibly powerful. This reverence for the individual child has many implications; it is the true inspiration for philosophical implementation. Beyond the philosophy, deeply knowing and seeing a child are how teachers can respond to trauma and emotional needs and can ensure that the dignity of all students, especially non-white students, is maintained and celebrated.

In terms of practical implementation, one of the main ways the image of the child is upheld within the Reggio framework is the concept of the 100 languages. This conceptual framework will be explored more fully in later chapters; however, in a distilled explanation, the idea embraces the child's individuality and approach to expressing themselves and their view of the world, as explained by the most well-known work on Reggio, *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards et all., 1995). Additionally, learning exchanges within the Reggio Philosophy are not simplified for the child. The Italian word "provocare - to provoke" captures how practitioners of the Reggio Philosophy often view their role with regards to learning moments (Wurm, 2005, p. 9). Rather than simplifying the concept or task for the child, teachers communicate a belief in the child and offer appropriate scaffolds, applying Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. Similarly, the writers of *Better than Carrots or Sticks* communicates a similar sentiment of how to effectively and respectfully reach diverse student by saying, "We don't want to make learning easy—we want to make it possible" (Smith et al., p.51). Undoubtedly, there is an immense need to keep standards high, while offering appropriate supports for a diverse group of students.

Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, explains the same concept within the vernacular of neuroscience. As Reggio practitioners "provoke" learning, Hammond explains how engaging in difficult learning is called "productive struggle" by neuroscientists (2015, p. 12). Hammond elaborates on this idea showing how linguistically and culturally diverse students often remain dependent learners due to the simplification of curriculum and a lack of entering into productive struggle (2015, p. 12). As she so aptly puts, "dependent doesn't mean deficit" (2015, p. 13). This distinction is key; Hammond's phrasing captures a negative attitude of adults working with students, especially those with diverse backgrounds. Additionally, there is a narrative shift from the need to simplify learning because the student is not capable to the view that all students are capable of learning difficult concepts, so teachers need to support and challenge all students. This crossover between literature from Reggio and research on Culturally Responsive Teaching suggests that lowering expectations and simplifying learning disrespects the innate competency of the child from any background.

Another way the philosophy demonstrates its commitment to the child is through project work and the development of the *atelier,* commonly referred to as a studio in English. In efforts to expand the "language" offerings for the children, Malaguzzi included a trained artist and a studio space in the Reggio schools (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 303). With the writings and images provided by the authors within *In the Spirit of the Studio,* the concept of the studio and its work comes to life. As she so clearly describes, the studio is considered "instrumental in the recovery of the image of the child" (Gandini et al., 2015, p. 10). Upon closer examination, this claim becomes clearer. According to Edwards et al., the studio is a place of discovery and interdisciplinary work; instead of treating content and experiences such as art and science as unrelated, project work in the studio leans into these difficult and interesting connections points (2012, p. 3070). As discussed previously, the learning is not simplified for the children, even more so, it is tailored to their interests and motivations with the framework of negotiated curriculum.

During my time at Cyert, I worked alongside two very seasoned studio educators who graciously supported projects inspired by the children with whom I worked. While working with the young toddler classroom, the children demonstrated a deep interest in producing sound. After a number of classroom learning moments around this focus, I collaborated with a studio educator to extend the ideas from observations to a fully developed studio experience. Skillfully, Suzanne Grove transformed the studio space into an elaborate "Sound Lab" where she integrated instruments, non-traditional items, elements of problems solving and cause and effect, as well as sensorial elements. The way Suzanne layered the materials invited each child to explore at their own pace and comfort levels, embracing the understanding of Multiple Intelligences. Children with a bolder temperament quickly approached suspended plastic sheets to run through freely to experience the exhilarating "shooooshing" sound. Other children, who tended to be calmer and more deliberate with their choices, found sound toys softly wrapped in fabric, which hid their true purpose. Upon shaking, their faces lit up with delight as the toys gently squeaked.

Throughout the space, cultural instruments donated from the diverse community of families throughout the years were presented, allowing children to explore with their hands.

Collaborating with Suzanne for the “Sound. Lab” was the moment I realized the potential of the studio and its relation to the image of the competent child. Through this time, the children’s learning touched on content from nearly every category of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards. When designed with intention, studio experiences can be broad in their reach while still maintaining purpose. More importantly, the children’s interests and motivations inspired the design, allowing educators to continuously challenge the child’s inquiry for the continuation of a project. In that way, studio experiences can honor the lived experiences of individual children, and when supported, challenge the child to extend their already capable selves.

A powerful aspect of project work and opportunities in the studio is that it is not reserved for children of a certain level of achievement. My thoughts around this are informed by my work at Cyert augmented by the readings from *The Hundred Languages of Children* and *In the Spirit of the Studio.* Teachers and studio artists thoughtfully organize smaller cohorts to achieve a balance of temperaments, encourage a specific focus, or foster social connections, depending on the intent. These rich, complex experiences are available for each child, which communicates a Reggio-inspired school’s believe in the potential of all children, regardless of present levels of development, behavioral tendencies, verbal language, and differences in culture and race. Learning experiences for Reggio practitioners and the children who inspire them remain challenging, compelling, and unique to the context in efforts to support and stimulate those involved.

From the literature on trauma-sensitive classrooms, Kristen Souers and Pete Hall echo the sentiments of access to complex learning for all students. In their work, *Fostering Resilient Learners*, Kristen Souers and Pete Hall state their guiding principle as raising “levels of academic achievement for every student” (2016, p. 1)**.** There is a compelling tie between the spirit of instigating complex learning and experiences in the atelier from the world of Reggio with this foundational concept from Trauma-informed care.

According to Souers and Hall, “trauma is an exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm a person’s capacity to cope” (2016, p. 15). From workshops and coursework, I have come to understand the experience of trauma and its ramifications are intimately personal to the individual, so much so that two individuals undergoing the same “exceptional experience” may respond entirely differently. With that, the emphasis on the competencies and expressions of the individual child comes into play. For example, a teacher with the knowledge of a child’s preferred “language” of expression might provide opportunities for children to explore challenging emotions or make sense of memories through a medium they feel confident in. It is imperative that teachers work to ensure children feel their value in the classroom.

Valuing all students for who they are is a tenant of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Lisa Delpit is the author of two books that have shaped my thinking on this topic and the framework for Anti-Racist Teaching. In her work, *Multiplication is for White People,* Delpit outlines her standards for creating excellence in diverse classrooms. Many of the points connect to the principles of the Reggio philosophy such as “recognize and build on children’s strengths” (Delpit, 2014, p. xix). This strength-based mentality is a common thread between the Reggio Philosophy, Trauma-informed care, and now Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Viewing the child in this light is paramount in its own right, but it paves the way for the meaning-making in other aspects of the classroom. Another point Delpit introduces in her first pages is that teachers must “provide children with the ego strength to challenge racial societal views of their own competence and worthiness and that of their families and communities” (2014, p. xix). While this concept may feel advanced for the early childhood environment, the National Association of Education for Young Children’s (NAECY) argued the same point. Overall, NAECY’s position statement on Advancing Equity outlines the necessity of equity in the early childhood classroom, who is responsible, what that looks like,

and acknowledges the work is continuous. In the opening lines, NAECY states that, "All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Thus, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity" (Advancing Equity, n.d.). Beyond just addressing bias and supporting identity, the position also includes that children must learn how to notice and address prejudice in developmentally appropriate ways.

This directly connects with Delpit's point about providing children with the "ego strength" to address racial stereotypes of their capacity (2014, p. xix). In early childhood circles, there is a growing understanding that because non-white children cannot avoid experiences of racism at a young age, it is necessary to adopt practices of anti-racist teaching in the classroom. Engaging with this work in the classroom might include reevaluating a classroom library to include diverse role models, de-centering whiteness in classroom materials, providing skin-tone affirming options for creative expression, and most importantly, having real and honest conversations about race and racism. As a white educator, I aim to keep growing in my skills and knowledge in this area. However, one practice that contributed to my non-white student's "ego strength" was using words of affirmation and emphasizing their identity in organic moments. While I recognize I was one part of these students' journey this year, I did see a boost of confidence in the black and brown learners in my classroom. It is my hope that their confidence supported by their teachers and family allow them to fight the inevitable prejudice throughout life.

Interestingly enough, as the information is synthesized between the Reggio Philosophy, Trauma-Informed classroom, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, another point becomes increasingly relevant. While the frameworks point to adult attitudes and behaviors, the greatest impact is how children view and carry themselves. When teachers shape learning experiences and mold interactions being mindful of the competent child, the child internalizes that positive message and continues to rise to the occasion. The child has always been whole and competent on their own merit, but these practices bolster a young child's sense of self, providing momentum to tackling challenging situations related to learning, their emotions, and their place in the world.

Chapter 3: Powerful and Supportive Relationships

"Good theater should always send people away feeling changed."
Suzanne Farrell

Suzanne Farrell was one of the premier ballerinas during the golden age of George Balanchine at New York City Ballet. She originated roles in a wide array of famous repertoire and exuded a distinct style when dancing. Farrell epitomized glamour on and off stage, capturing the hearts of audience members. My first real understanding of this ballerina came during my time training at Ballet Chicago. One of my teachers at the time also danced for Farrell in her company's residency at the Kennedy Center. This teacher shared her eclectic teaching methods, challenging us dancers to expand our musicality and creativity with movement. Later, I attended an open audition at the Kennedy Center for Farrell's company.

Given the nature of the Kennedy Center, the process of the audition was highly secure and systemized, adding to the buzz of nervous energy among us dancers. We were corralled in groups like blind sheep before finally reaching the studio in which we would dance for Farrell. The moment she entered the room, her presence was hard to miss. Despite being skeletal and showing signs of age, her posture and gestures exuded glamour just as my teacher had shared. From the moment she entered, all of us dancers stood erect with our eyebrows lifted to show our eagerness. Underneath our pink tights, our muscles were galvanized, ready to begin. The combination and order of steps were incredibly unusual, and in my opinion, unnecessarily difficult. The majority of the time during this audition I felt like a failure, and based on the red-faced expressions of my peers, I was not the only one. The glamour of this icon faded away to reveal a menacing power figure participating in intellectual and emotional warfare.

Frankly, my experience with many teachers, choreographers, and directors over my twenty-some years in the ballet world developed into a problematic power dynamic, whether that was rooted in my own sensitive nature or the reality of that relationship. When I stepped into the role of the teacher, I vowed to act out of care and compassion, rather than elicit fear in my students as I had experienced dancing. This is why diving into how relationships among and between teachers, families, and children deserve a closer look.

Ultimately, relationships built on a deep respect of one another is the goal, and in the education setting, the image of the child discussed in Chapter 2 serves as the foundation for all stakeholders to engage in this work. Within the Reggio framework, relationships are formed with "reciprocal respect and support" (Edwards et al, 1995, p. xvii). Similar to the therapy concept of unconditional positive regard, individuals within the framework strive to see strength and uniqueness in the other, rather than quickly identifying challenges and defects. This spirit of reciprocity is the goal for all relationships that occur in the education setting—between teachers, between teachers and families, between families, between teachers and children, and certainly among the children as well. Reciprocity and respect are the roots of this ecosystem of these relationships.

In *Constructivism across the Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms,* Christine Chaille provides additional core ideas around relationships in this type of environment. For her, the pedagogy of listening, participation of all stakeholders, belief in the child, and documentation are foundational to relationships within the Reggio Philosophy (2015, p. 7). Certainly, upholding the image of the child and belief in their potential is paramount, as established in the previous chapter. There is also an emphasis placed on listening, active participation, and documentation, which will be discussed further. Edwards et al. includes a chapter penned by US professor David Hawkins in *The Hundred Languages of Children* in which the Italian concept of civility is presented, with relationship to listening and relationships. Hawkins explains that:

> …civility, then, means the ability to get together; it doesn't mean to be polite. You don't have to be always polite when you get together, but you do have to congregate, you want to exchange things, you want to form common ideas. (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 77)

Unsurprisingly, the philosophy does not shy away from complexity and nuance even within interpersonal dynamics. This idea of civility encompasses the many relationships within a Reggio-inspired environment. Between children, conflicts and misunderstandings naturally occur. In pedagogical discussions with Alison Mahler, it is the teacher's role to remain close to the source of the conflict, observe the children's approach, and reserve intervention for extreme circumstances (A. Mahler, personal communication, June 2021). While this method may feel uncomfortable and counterintuitive, it communicates a belief in the child as well as a value in navigating difficult moments. Civility also connects to the dynamics of the class at large, which allows for developmentally appropriate disagreements during full class discussions at meeting or meals. By not expecting perfect harmony or politeness, teachers and learners fully engage it what it means to be human.

During my time at the Cyert Center for Early Childhood Education, I began to learn how this concept moved from theory to practice. The demands of direct service work often take a toll on individuals, and I saw how this tension bubbled up with dynamics among educators. I was fortunate to work under the wing of my mentor, Caitlin DeSalvo, who modeled how engage in productive conversations after a moment of conflict. As she so aptly describes, "We all have human moments," (C. DeSalvo, personal communication, December 2019). I learned how to circle back, acknowledge my hand in the tension, and reestablish that positive, reciprocal relationship. That lesson was so powerful to me that I even adapted this practice to how I approach moments with children. Especially if a behavior necessitates a swift or stern redirection, I strive to make the space to check in with the child and unpack both of our feelings on the situation. Similarly, misunderstandings with parents naturally happen. I am continuing to gain comfort in this process in order to have conversations and understand more deeply. Thanks to Caitlin, I have an example of one way to engage in the reciprocity needed in this work.

Certainly, this high regard for the other members of a community provides a strong base. Yet, there is more substance to this concept in connection with philosophical roots, research around trauma in the classroom, as well as forging strong relationships across racial and cultural divides. Strategies to form connections in the educational setting are laid out in the practice of the Reggio Philosophy; socio-constructivism is at the core of the philosophy. According to Chaillé, "Constructivism is a theory of learning that posits that children construct knowledge through interaction between their own ideas and experiences in the social and physical world" (2015, p. 5). Through this, there is an emphasis on the lived experiences of learners and how their exchanges with the physical world and their peers shape their learning. As mentioned in Chapter 2, projects unfold based on the interests and discoveries of the learners, rather than a predetermined unit designed by the teacher. Many refer to this design of learning as negotiated curriculum. While the Reggio philosophy offers guiding principles, the focus and trajectory of learning occurs based on the contextual environment and its individuals. In efforts to make this concept tangible, professionals in the philosophy describe the ebb and flow of this learning as a "table-tennis way of conversing" (Wurm, 2005, p. 77). This encapsulates how ideas, theories, or projects evolve in negotiated curriculum. It is important to note that the traditional power dynamic of the teacher and student is transformed into a partnership where everyone is participating in the exchange. In a Reggio-inspired classroom, it becomes less about "I" and "My" and shifts towards "We" and "Ours." Even a subtle language shift can communicate how children have active ownership over the classroom. With that, the children's ideas are valued, and teachers support this process by offering questions, suggestions, support, critiques, and celebration. In this way, having a more open and fluid learning process, it is natural to respond to children of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as provide space or alternatives to children with emotional needs.

Another aspect of the Reggio Philosophy which communicates strong relationships is the emphasis on observation and documentation. As one of the founding educators in Reggio, Carlina Rinaldi shares her thoughts on the process of closely paying attention the child:

> I observe you, and while I observe you, I "capture" you, I interpret you. But at the same time I also modify my own knowable. So observation is not only an individual action but also a reciprocal relationship. It is an action, a relationship, a process that makes us aware of what is happening around us. (Rinaldi, cited in Wrum, 2005, p. 100)

Observation and documentation is undoubtedly subjective, but the point Rinaldi makes is that by looking closely, educators adapt their own mental schemas and grow awareness by observing the child thoughtfully. In practice, observation and documentation often mean quietly using a notebook, photos, or videos to capture these learning exchanges in real time and later analyzing and synthesizing the information to deepen the understanding of the child, group of children, learning moments, among other outcomes. It can remain in a casual form like post-it notes on child's work, evolve into a more polished outcome like a documentation panel, or a format in between. As Chapter 2 touched on, education is viewed as a political right, and in that vein, documentation is considered democratic as it "makes the learning visible" (Edwards et al., 1995). When the actions and discoveries of children are shown, it emphasizes the value of their work, allows families to feel a part of the process, and at times, communicates the potential of children to a broader audience, such as the larger school community or local area.

Another layer to observation and documentation is its power to organically collect information on students for the purposes of an assessment or tracking patterns. A written record of children's words, actions, learning choices, and even challenges can be powerfully used to have a fuller picture of that child. I used this method to deepen my understanding of a child in my Pre-K classroom this past year. When I noticed the child having immense difficulty with transitions, my supervisor reminded me to look closer. Having my notebook nearby allowed me to scribble down observational notes to begin to reveal clear signs of trauma in her behavior. As the teacher, this awareness moved my natural frustration to genuine care and concern for her wellbeing. My records of her words and behavior enabled me to reach out to trusted professionals for guidance and ultimately provide the necessary support for the child and her family. While observation and documentation are not explicitly designed for tuning into trauma, gathering information on a child can paint a fuller picture of how they are experiencing the world and guide next steps to provide a safe-space for their time at school.

According to Souers and Hall in *Fostering Resilient Learners,* trauma experienced in childhood is sadly prevalent. Sauers and Hall reference a statistic from a 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's health that revealed 35 million of US children have experienced one or more type of childhood trauma. To put that into perspective, Sauers and Hall also refer to a 2006 study which revealed 52% of children between two and five have lived through a major life stressor. (2016, p. 19). While these studies and their resulting statistics point to acute occurrences, the concept of "complex trauma" is a necessary addition to this discussion. Souers and Hall include a definition of complex trauma, which is essentially multiple or simultaneous exposures to child maltreatment (2016, p. 15). Instead of a singular event, the impact of complex trauma occurs over time. With this understanding, I suspect many families experienced acute or complex trauma as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While is impossible to know how this year has impacted each family and child, prolonged household stress over finances, childcare, health, domestic conflicts, or other factors are at play. With the statistics on childhood trauma and the recognition of COVID-19's impacts, playing close attention to signs of trauma in the classroom is more important moving forward than ever. In the early childhood environment, that often means having a safe space to explore emotions with support from peers and teachers.

This safe space within the school environment is critical in establishing what I am referring to as "powerful relationship." As an overarching concept for this, editors Giulio Ceppi and Michele Zini of *Children, Spaces, and Relations* capture the importance of openness in the educational space. For Ceppi and Zini, this openness involves "the willingness to listen and reopen to others" as well as "openness and attention to others as value, respect for differences, however they may be expressed: differences of race, relation, sex, and culture, extending more generally to any kind of diversity" (2008, p. 10). Living out this sentiment occurs in how teachers listen to and respect the experiences of families, how teachers model listening and responding for children, and how children are supported in their own listening communication skills. For those in my classroom, we agreed to adopt "one voice at a time." The phrasing of this agreement was intentional as it places the value on the speaker, regardless of whether it was a teacher, child, or other professional. Our class also showed a deep desire to share their feelings, dreams, and nightmares during morning meeting. Children and teachers in this circle each day had an opportunity to freely share their feelings while holding a soft item. Initially, the practice aimed at growing receptive and expressive language, but this daily focus grew to a beloved time for each member of the class to feel truly human. Sharing feelings in morning meeting is not a profoundly new routine; however, there was an undercurrent of deep emotional trust between my co-teacher, the children, and me. When I witnessed this level of trust, the true power of establishing relationships in the classroom became clear to me.

Another layer of creating space for powerful relationships is being mindful of the cultural elements at play in a classroom. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain,* Hammond outlines three layers of culture. Surface culture refers to dress, music, food, and customs that are easily visible. Shallow culture refers more to the unspoken rules or social norms of a certain culture. Deep culture touches on spirituality, group harmony, and world views. (2015, p. 22-23). Cultural understanding and engagement in educational settings are often most accessible at the shallow level; for example, a common practice is to include family cultural celebrations. Yet, a deeper understanding from a teacher standpoint is likely to have a larger impact long-term. Hammond points out that fully understanding each distinct culture in a classroom is daunting, but utilizing cultural archetypes may be an effective way to tune into student motivation. Cultures fall into the categories of collectivism or individualism; collectivist cultures orient towards valuing collaboration and community efforts, whereas individualistic cultures emphasize the work of one individual. (2016, p. 25). Understanding where a child falls on this continuum provides more information in order to deeply know and support the child.

In Better than Carrots or Sticks, the authors reveal the desires of the student and the need of teachers to shape classroom practices around these values. It is clearly stated that "students want teachers to take them seriously" (Smith et al., pp. 61-66). I do not think it is a stretch to say that students of any age, even in the earliest years, crave the teachers and caregivers around them to take themselves seriously, both as learners and human beings with real experiences. A continuous commitment to respect for the student is paramount. Trivializing the learning, experiences, or feelings of a young child is damaging since maintaining trust is an ongoing process. However, as mentioned previously, the teacher-student relationship is not the only connection in an educational community. Families bringing concerns to a teacher desires to be taken seriously, just as a colleague with a pedagogical or personal dilemma. Undoubtedly, there are moments when this level of care and attention is difficult, but a shared commitment of all members of the community to engage with respect and care for one another is the ideal.

From my coursework at Carlow, the message that "relationships are the best classroom management tool" has been engrained in me. Having a strong connection with students is the first step in forming a classroom community, and I feel fortunate that smaller class sizes and flexible schedules allow early childhood educators like me to form those bonds. Yet, the value in investing in relationships extends beyond the classroom. Commitment to active listening and thoughtful responses to families and

colleagues, maintaining a belief in the child as developed in Chapter 2, and being willing navigate complexities with children all support the delicate ecosystem in a classroom and within a school. I imagine this ecosystem of relationships much like the variety of species in a rainforest—vibrant, highly sensitive, and strong due to its diversity. When every part is valued and has space to thrive, this web of relationships can be truly impactful.

Chapter 4: Family, Culture, and Language

"As ballerinas, we don't use our voices. Our voice is the body and the movement quality"
Wendy Whelan

From the moment I started ballet training, I learned and accepted the unwritten laws of the studio. Strict dress codes, pristine appearance, and unwavering obedience were the status quo in the land of pointe shoes. As a child bubbling with energy and ideas at school, I soon learned that my questions needed to be intentional, and my value and success were measured by the control and expression of my body, not my words. My voice in ballet became visible through the joy I expressed in executing intricate jumps or theatrical moments on stage. I did feel like I had an artistic voice on stage, but Wendy Whelan's words do capture much of my, and many of my colleagues, experience in dancing.

I met Whelan during my Chicago dancing days. At the time, Whelan was touring her self-produced show entitled, "Restless Creature," which she performed at Chicago's Harris Theater. Along with her performances, she taught masterclasses and payed a visit to her former colleague and my current director, Dan Duell. Whelan and Duell's careers overlapped at New York City Ballet, and the two were eager to reconnect. Whelan came to observe Duell teach the advanced women's class. That day happened to be one of Duell's more rigorous classes, likely an effort demonstrate the virtuosity of both his teaching methods and his dancers. Whelan perched on a stool next to the piano, and she exuded a gentle and positive energy. She smiled often at us dancers, and her observation actually made me feel more at ease despite my emerging blisters and constant fatigue. Following the class, I quickly asked to take a picture with her, and she offered me genuinely kind words about my dancing. It's ironic that a dancer quoted about not having a voice made such an impact on me with a few encouraging words.

The shift from two decades focused on my body to anything else was jarring for me at first, and it took a transition period to find my voice. In a way, I reclaimed that talkative and enthusiastic spirit I had previously embodied. Soon, I realized that my voice in education had a distinct purpose as a white educator. I learned the importance of honoring and celebrating cultures during my time at Cyert, and I began to learn the frameworks to cultivate an inclusive educational space for children and families across differences of race, culture, language, and beyond. It is important to note that I am far from fluent on this particular subject; the following section includes a synthesis of content from the three main elements of this paper. My vantage point is colored by my own identity as a white woman with inherent privileges. What follows is the information and discoveries that resonate thus far, with full recognition my work addressing my own bias and unpacking my Eurocentric values to be a better ally will be a lifelong journey.

Despite being a European philosophy, the founding principles of the Reggio approach embrace the diversity of humanity. This idea is captured in the beginning page of *The Hundred Languages of Children.* The authors describe that philosophy and the way the book unfolds is "a profound meditation on the nature of early human nature and the ways in which it can be guided and simulated across different cultural milieus" (Edwards et al, p. xiii). While this is a high bar for both the practice and the book, the philosophy, at its best, is inspired by the beauty and complexity of the human experience. As mentioned in Chapter 2, learning is not simplified for children in a Reggio-inspired environment, including experiences around race, language, and culture. Malaguzzi, the founder of the philosophy, described his stance on culture in the education systems by stating, "It has been said that the environment should act as a kind of aquarium which reflects the ideas, ethics, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live in it. This is what we are working towards" (Wurm, 2005, p. 24). This quote touches on the cultural responsiveness embedded in the Reggio approach. Certainly, this connects to how the culture, language, and personalities of the children and families are to be included in the classroom.

However, I would argue that it is also important to include representation of people and experiences outside of the classroom. For example, if a classroom trends towards homogeneity, a teacher can thoughtfully include literature and learning experiences to broaden the students' world view and positive images of people of different cultural and racial backgrounds.

One of the ways that the Reggio framework allows for and celebrates differences among children is the concept of the 100 Languages. (See Appendix 1 for an English translation of Malaguzzi's poem.) Overall, this poem emphasizes the creative energy of children, endless possibilities, multiple intelligences, and the interconnection of content areas. Through the approach's focus on introducing many avenues of self-expression and symbolic representation, participants have a myriad of ways to communicate their ideas. Additionally, the poem challenges the value of the written or spoken word in defense of the "language" the child feels most empowered to communicate their ideas (Edwards et al., 1995). Extending this idea, these languages are designed to be treated equally. With the book *In The Spirit of the Studio,* the authors point out that practitioners "recognize that all these languages need to be considered with equal dignity and value. They should receive adequate competent support from the adults and environment" (Gandini et al, 2015, p. 15). Often, development in the spoken and written word is placed at a higher value than other ways of demonstrating knowledge. With that Eurocentric focus, children exhibiting competencies in other skills are put at a disadvantage. That provides a strong connection to supporting cultural expression and inclusivity around differences of home languages and overall linguistic acquisition. With regard to trauma, knowing a child's preferred language of expression can allow the child to work through their emotions. For example, if a child is drawn to creative expression, that might be a way for them to communicate or work through something they are experiencing. It is important to note that teachers are not trained therapists, but growing an awareness of trauma and its impact contributes to being a responsive teacher.

Examining trauma further is relevant to the development of this section. Souers and Hall in *Fostering Resilient Learners* offer practical examples of how Adverse Child Experiences may show up in the classroom. When students are in what they refer to as "survival mode," the brain decides to flight, fight, or freeze in hopes of escaping real or perceived danger (2016, p. 27). This reaction translates into specific behaviors based on if the brain decided to flight, fight, or freeze. For the purposes of this section, I would like to focus on how "freeze" might manifest in the classroom. According to Souers and Hall, students who are in "freeze" mode might appear numb, fall completely silent, cannot get needs met, or generally are unable to move or act (2016, p. 29). Even with providing many avenues of expression within the Reggio framework, a "freeze" moment can cut off access to higher thinking and processing. In that moment, it cannot be expected for a child to tap into their "language" to explain their experience; the child can only focus on basic needs. With a detection of danger, their young brain is trapped in what people in the field refer to as "the downstairs brain" which is purely focused on basic needs. Learning, processing, higher-order feelings like empathy, and decision making occur only in the upstairs brain. It is unrealistic to expect children to move beyond their very real fears and trauma response without first appealing to their need to feel safe.

Daniel Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, PhD provide numerous practical strategies for caregivers to better help developing brains regulate in their work T*he Wholebrained Child.* In a general sense, the authors capture the power of validating the feelings and experiences of those in front of us in a neutral and nonjudgmental way. Rather than the overused "it's okay" or "you're fine," Siegel and Bryson suggest acknowledging the root of a child's emotional experience, even when that might seem trivial. A specific way the authors suggest building in this "whole-brain" knowledge is actually demonstrating a model of the brain with a gently closed fist. The fingers represent the upstairs brain and the fleshy palm represents the downstairs brain. When the two parts are not touching, it is challenging to calmly make decisions, similar to the flight, fight, and freeze experience referenced previously. (2012, p. 62-63). When introducing this concept to young learners, this tactile model can serve as a reminder in challenging

moments. With the prevalence of trauma in youth, deepening an understanding of this and other practices serves to support both learners with traumatic experiences. Taking that one step forward, including trauma-sensitive practices and mindfulness in the classroom is beneficial for all students, borrowing from the concept of Universal Design for Learning.

In addition to trauma, educators are also being asked to increase cultural and racial awareness in support of school communities. An understanding of the value of cultural diversity is embedded in the Reggio Philosophy. In a Reggio-inspired environment, "its students undergo a sustained apprenticeship in humanity, one that may last a lifetime" (Edwards et al, p. xvi). The philosophy allows teachers and learners to look beyond skills and development into the deeper themes of nature that connect us. In that way, there is space to dive into cultural differences, find common ground, and form strong connections that might not always be possible within a pressurized environment. To add to this, Edwards explains that "We want to embrace, not ignore, the concept of differences among children." (2012, p. 189) Instead of the damaging "colorblind" approach, the philosophy celebrates differences and includes that within the classroom context across ability, language, race, culture, etc. Coming from a framework established long ago, the fundamental principle reigns true. Within Italy, the cultural and linguistic landscape has shifted, allowing this value to really be applied. Like with any challenge within the philosophy, it is believed to be a way to deepen the understanding of humanity through continuous and intentional efforts.

With those efforts, children have access to a world of learning from the earliest age. The educational field is placing a greater focus on addressing race and racism head-on, especially in the wake of the 2020 racial justice movements across the country and constant instances of systemic violence towards non-white communities. While there are a multitude of resources on this topic, I am drawing my information by a concise article published by NAECY, penned by Kristen Cole and Diandra Verwayne. Within the scope of this project, it is not possible for me to thoroughly engage with the original studies this article references. In the interest of time, I am choosing this article to support the development of this section. Cole and Verwayne begin the article by referencing a beginning of the year classroom experience, allowing children to explore their unique identities. Parents expressed discomfort in the emphasis on differences rather than unity, which resulted in a discussion of the value of this work. Cole and Verwayne reference a study done by Winkler in 2009 which revealed that children as early as preschool notice racial differences and may begin exclusion based on race (2018).

It is my belief that engaging in anti-racism work within the classroom is to the benefit of every child, teacher, and family. However, I also recognize this is a highly debated topic at the local, state, and federal level. Returning to the ideas of Cole and Verwayne, the value is in both supporting non-white students to develop a positive image of their race, as well as fostering an awareness of injustice. In their own words, Cole and Verwayne describe this work as:

> For all children to understand that the effects of racism are not the fault of people of color, we need to address these issues early in children's lives. We begin by fostering the positive development of every child's racial identity. This work must be paired with opportunities for young children to learn where and how injustice and inequality operate in our society. When children are armed with this knowledge and these skills, they can begin to disrupt these systems and work toward building a more equitable society for all of us. (2018).

From theory to practice, engaging with the topics of race and racism tends to be more nebulous than this inspiring statement. However, Cole and Verwayne's point about beginning with identity work for all children is a clear first action step. It is also common to reevaluate day to day classroom practices ensuring a diverse library, classroom materials, and an ability of all children to feel represented in the classroom. Yet, there is still more. With a combination of cultural understanding and neuroscience,

Hammond demonstrates the experience of a "brain on culture." By first providing an overall map of the brain, Hammond allows the reader to have a base of knowledge. For the purposes of this section, it is most important to discuss the purpose of the amygdala, which Hammond refers to as the "brain's guard dog." Essentially, this part of the brain signals a stress reaction if there is any type of threat—social or physical (2015, p. 40). For a "brain on culture," it follows a certain set of rules according to Hammond. The rule that stands out most is "the brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community" (2015, p. 47). As a brain is monitoring for social threats, the amygdala is on high alert. One of these powerful "social threats" are microaggressions, which threaten someone's sense of safety from a brain standpoint, similar to the flight, fight, and freeze response discussed in regards to trauma. Hammond articulates the point further by stating:

> As a culturally responsive teacher you have to familiarize yourself with common actions or conditions that make students feel unsafe, even if they cannot articulate this sense of threat…It is important to act according to students' definition not your own. (2015, p. 47).

From this information, it is imperative to be aware of actions, words, and behaviors that impede a student's feeling of safety. Yet, that is impossible without a deep knowing of students and first working to form relationships, as previously discussed.

Extending connections to families requires the same principles. In her book *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit captures the challenges of communicating across cultural differences, which is often exacerbated due to the growing use of digital communication. In her words, Delpit argues that, "One of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings is trying to communicate across our individual differences, trying to make sure that what we say to someone is interpreted the way we intend. This becomes even more difficult when we attempt to communicate across social differences, gender, race, or class lines, or any situation of unequal power" (2006, p. 135). This quote encapsulates the nuanced difficulty that occurs in in human communication; however, Delpit is not shy to point out that these deeper differences in identity as well as power dynamics are also at play. To add to the conversation, Delpit highlights that different communities identify "good teaching" in different ways (2006, p. 139). Much like a relationship with a child needs to be tailored to an individual, the same can be said about family connections. From Delpits' writing, challenges to understand each other across the teacher-family divide are inevitable, but even more so when deeper differences and implied hierarchies are present.

Additionally, the values and goals for the child's education is unique to each community and family, meaning a tension between teacher intentions and the family's desires may also exist. This tension may become apparent in initial welcome conversations or as a result of classroom incident.

Researching or formulating any sort of action plan for navigating the nuance of family, culture, and race feels futile. Consolidating such a complex and individualized issue into a standardized guide negates the fact that each child and family has their own story, which may or may not be closely tied to their experiences and attitudes with race and culture. Delpit offers guidance on this subtlety by stating, "In any discussion of education and culture, it is important to remember that children are individuals and cannot be made to fit in to any preconceived mold of how they are 'supposed to act'," (2006, p. 167). Delpit's words shift the focus from expecting patterns from particular group to being in tune with the individual and the influential parts of their unique sociocultural context. This focus on the individual with their unique tendencies and strengths aligns with Reggio framework closely.

As much as I feel personally connected to the values of the Reggio Philosophy, I do find its approach to embracing cultural and racial differences incomplete. Certainly, a common thread in developing relationships in this way goes back to the Reggio principle of "reciprocal respect" and finding the

humanity in the individual. Yet, at times this poetic and optimistic vantage point feels dismissive of systemic cultural and racial harm. From workshops and coursework, it is my understanding that it is not enough to merely be accepting or celebratory of cultural and racial differences. This is where the concept of Antiracist/Antibias (ABAR), comes in. In her book*Start Here, Start Now*, Liz Kleinrock unpacks the conceptual framework of this topic as well as provides practical guidance for educators. Kleinrock explains her use of ABAR by stating that “ABAR is rooted in action by identifying our biases in order to dismantle white supremacist beliefs, values, and culture” (2021, xxiv). There is no shortage of terminology to refer to culture, race, bias, and systemic issues. However, I find the way Kleinrock describes ABAR incredibly compelling. It is an action role which necessitates both personal reflection and outward proactiveness. This attitude, I believe, is the missing piece to how the Reggio Philosophy approaches cultural responsiveness.

In the Spring 2021 issue of *Teaching Tolerance*, Val Brown interviewed and wrote an article on educator Lorena German’s stance on anti-racist teaching. Brown begins with a hard-hitting question on the presence of white supremacy in the American school system. German quickly dispels the myth that white supremacy is only apparent with extreme actions, and rather, white supremacy in the classroom innocently appears as the urgency for quantity over quality or an overemphasis on individualism (2021, p. 29-30). The examples German uses connect back to “deep culture” archetypes like the individualism vs. collectivism spectrum, explained by Hammond. Another important point German brings up is the focus should be less on terminology and more about the approach and the rationale behind the values. On that note, German provides a term she finds to embody inclusiveness more fully, “culturally sustaining” (2021, p. 30). Interestingly enough, this term also denotes action. In declaring to be “culturally sustaining,” it indicates continual motion and inclusion. Regardless of the terminology adopted, the literature on this topic shows the need for both action and refection.

The Reggio framework provides a strong, philosophical base to approach cultural differences in the spirit of finding the beauty of humanity and allowing a multitude of expressive languages to develop. In practice, maintaining the dignity of individuals and navigating difficult conversations feels less poetic, albeit fundamentally necessary for the dignity of all involved. With the neuroscience examples from Hammand, nuanced descriptions from Delpit, and the viewpoint of German, there is clearly a lot on the line with conversations and teachings across racial and cultural divides. To me, incorporating more of the “active” approaches to dismantling cultural oppression feels appropriate within the context of the American school system. Based on my experiences, embracing “humanity” in the Reggio vernacular also means engaging with and criticizing its dark underbelly, with the goal of affirming and amplifying historically marginalized voices.

Chapter 5: The Classroom Environment

"But we can laugh about it"
Violette Verdy

My fondest memories during my time dancing at IU were with my professor and world class ballerina, Violette Verdy. She approached her work in the classroom with infectious joy, quick wit, and poetic anecdotes. Verdy gave wicked hard steps in our pointe classes resulting in the majority of the class looking like fawns learning to walk, only with pointe shoes. She balanced these challenges with vulnerable connection with her students. By example, she encouraged us to laugh off our mistakes and not take ourselves so seriously. To me, she was the Julia Child of the ballet world, and I ate up any word of criticism or encouragement this magnificent woman shared with me.

As I continued on in my ballet career, her combinations and preferences stayed with me, so much that my pre-show rituals included her steps. Her death during my first season in a professional company wrecked me, but I vowed to carry her memory on, wherever my path led. Although I was not conscious of this, her laugher and acceptance of honest mistakes informs how I show up in the classroom. She was one of my first teachers in the ballet world to offer a safe space for mistakes. Her permission to laugh off imperfections was not an invitation to give up, rather it allowed her students to be willing to attempt difficult steps and maintain a positive outlook. I now understand how enduring that lesson was for me as I hope to foster a positive and supportive classroom environment. For me, the environment includes both the physical space and how it invites people to feel combined with the collection of interactions in that space. Its impact on the learning experience for both teachers and learners cannot be underestimated

Throughout *Working in the Reggio Way*, Wurm provide thought-provoking questions to guide educators closer to their own understanding of a Reggio-inspired environment. The questions offered around the classroom environment include "What kind of feeling do you want to give your students?"; "What do you think they need?" '"How should you students feel when they arrive at school?"; "How are the students safe inside and outside?" (Wurm, 2005, p. 37). These overarching questions inspire teachers to take a closer look at how students might interpret environmental cues throughout their time at school. Generally, these questions are relevant to all teachers, across philosophies and curriculums. However, when considering a more detailed understanding of the environment, the Reggio philosophy provides more concepts to mull over.

Commonly referred to as "the third teacher" in Reggio circles, the environment is considered fundamental to the learning journey of the child. Malaguzzi provides a detailed conception of space, which is included throughout the *The 100 Languages of Children*. Malaguzzi believes deeply in the power of space by arguing that "it is necessary to keep in mind how influential the environment is with regard to the affective, cognitive, and linguistic acquisition" (Edwards et al, p. 321). Malaguzzi recognized the power of the environment on the experiences in the early childhood setting. It is important to note that Malaguzzi acknowledged the environment's influence on the child beyond merely learning outcomes. Embracing the whole and complete child, the environment supports the many ways a child encounters learning—through their bodies, cognition, emotions, language, and relations—each with their own unique pace and approach.

Wurm describes the feeling and impact of a Reggio-inspired space using the term "*ambiente"* (2005, p. 37). This terminology is undoubtedly elusive and highly subjective at first introduction. Yet, there are choices made within a space to state an intention or provoke a certain emotional response. For example, when home owners make choices in their space, there is often discussion of how lighting options or paint colors provoke a feeling or mood; that is analogous of "*ambiente"* in the classroom. Cultivating an

amiable classroom environment in the Reggio way contributes to being culturally responsive and sensitive to experiences of trauma. For example, do children of different races and language backgrounds feel invited and represented? Also, do the layout and color choices communicate a level of calmness? Is there a soft area children can use when experiencing strong emotions? Additionally, Reggio practitioners view the classroom environment as an evolving space to meet the needs, motivations, and growing abilities of the children throughout their time together. With a less-static classroom, teachers are able to use their observation skills and belief in the child to make continuous adaptations.

A more abstract concept related to the classroom environment is the organization of time. Wurm points out that Italian teachers have a more "fluid and elastic" organization of time compared to their American counterparts (2005, p. 53). This author even provides a side by side comparison of a typical day in an American and Italian preschool setting. Seeing the number of superfluous transitions expected of children in an American preschool begs the question of what purpose this really serves. In my observations of the children in my Pre-K classroom, days which included a faster pace or additional transitions heightened any underlying behavioral or emotional challenges in the children, not to mention my own level of stress. We had much greater success leaning into a slower rhythm of the day. Wurm points out a fundamental Italian concept of time with an explanation of the phrase "domani, domani" (2005, p. 53) This idea encompasses the Italian's belief that there is always tomorrow. As an educator, I have internalized American urgency and perfectionism, and it comes out in the classroom. Previously mentioned, this value of quantity over quality is a sign of white supremacy values entering the classroom, according to German in *Teaching Tolerance* (Brown, 2021). Reflecting on this phrase reminds me that there is more time, and it reminds me to take a breath. When I have that level of peace, I am able to be more responsive and aware of myself, my students, and how I can positively shape what is in front of me. Without embracing "*domani, domani,"* I am at risk of being reactive rather than responsive. While I am not aware of literature on the organization of time and experiences of trauma for children, I can speak to my own experience. When timing is free and generous, especially for demanding or important tasks I feel more at ease. In the classroom, when I am more at ease, I tend to have a greater positive attitude towards classroom challenges.

That being said, Souers and Hall capture the significance of teacher attitudes in creating a trauma-informed classroom environment. In their words:

> …the adult is necessarily in charge of the setting and the tone of the space. It is our demeanor, our approach, our behaviors, our volume, and our presence that affects how our young people live, breathe, and perform in the classroom… It starts with us. It starts with you. (2016, p. 41).

This excerpt shows the level of influence teachers and caregivers have to set the tone for a safe, nurturing, and positive environment. The sentiment of "it starts with you" can also be applied to the role of educators in cultivating a safe space for culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students. In the introduction of *Start Here, Start Now*, Kleinrock outlines the teacher's role in antiracist and anti-bias work. She writes that in order "to build a student-centered community of learners, educators have to engage in deep self-reflection and identity work, de-center themselves, and relinquish some control of their classrooms" (2021, p. 2). The "deep self-reflection" work Kleinrock points to often requires educators, including myself, to examine classroom interactions where implicit bias is the driving force and commit to show up differently the next time.

De-centering the voice of the teacher and embracing the involvement of students of any age strikes educators differently based on their past experiences and current levels of comfort. Cultivating partnership in a classroom certainly has ties in the Reggio Philosophy, and more recent literature on restorative practices echoes these values. According to Smith, Fisher, and Frey in *Better than Carrots or*

Sticks, students enjoy school more “when they have opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with their peers” (2015, p. 36) This is the crux of socio-constructivism found in the implementation of the Reggio philosophy. Overall, this supports Social Learning Theory in that learning occurs in a context and in relationship with others. A Reggio-inspired early childhood settling has a unique opportunity to engage in the social construction of learning, based on the interactions between the teachers, children, and the classroom environment. Since a discussion of the scope and purpose of project work occurred in early sections, I would like to focus on the co-creation of classroom agreements and management. Smith, Fisher, and Frey offer suggestions for the creation of classroom systems with the lens of restorative practice. The authors believe this co-creation “is vital, as it provides students with a sense of ownership that they otherwise might lack.” (2015, p. 49). Teacher- directed systems and guidelines have the potential to completely overlook what learners genuinely value and need in their space. When the establishment of classroom practices includes the children, there is a clear shift in ownership. Including the opinions of children ties back to the fundamental value of the whole child, and it invites consideration of cultural and racial differences in determining what is safe and acceptable at school.

In discussions with Allison Mahler, classroom agreements are an ongoing process in the rooms at the Boulder Journey School, a Reggio-inspired school in Colorado. Comfort around risk taking and negotiating conflict may vary drastically from classroom to classroom depending upon the group dynamics of the children and the teachers involved, and these exchanges are highly personal (A. Mahler, personal communication, June 2021). With these agreements, teachers are able to guide behavior. Smith, Fisher, and Frey suggest that these written agreements serve as a gentle reminder when behavior is in violation of this shared contract. A reminder using the agreements can avoid the harm of shame or humiliation tactics, accord to Smith, Fisher, and Frey (2015, p. 49).

The classroom environment is unique to its members and the design of the physical space. Fully adopting the environment as “the third teacher” means the composition of the space supports the development of the whole child, especially on a cognitive and emotional level. Practices within the classroom have the opportunity to be responsive to children experiencing trauma as well as support the safety and self-image of children across cultures, races, and languages. Ultimately, a classroom can be inspired by various frameworks and philosophies; I just happen to be exploring these particular elements. The Reggio Philosophy provides a base of aesthetics and meaningful principles, which can also be informed by practices from Culturally Relevant Teaching and Trauma-informed Care. With the synthesis of this content, it is clear that the classroom environment can be reflective of the identities, strengths, and challenges of those engaged in the space to create a strong learning community, and the space can evolve as those individuals learn and grow.

Chapter 6: Reflective Teacher: No Final Bow

"I feel like going to class every morning is so humbling.
You're always working to improve, and you're always being critiqued on your next performance.
It's not about what you've done. There's always room to grow."
Misty Copeland

After my freshmen year of college, I felt lost. Balancing the social distractions, academics, and the demands of my ballet schedule was difficult for me. I saw my peers who dedicated all of their energy on ballet find greater success in the studio than me, and I felt the pangs of jealously I often experienced during my dancing days. At this time, Misty Copeland's presence in the ballet world was undeniable. She released a memoir documenting her trials and triumphs of her ballet training and eventual rise at the American Ballet Theater; I clambered to get my hands on it.

Copeland's experiences and message of resiliency were so inspiring during my season of self-doubt. As a white dancer, my lived experiences and challenges were not negatively impacted by my race, in the case of Copeland. However, her writing communicated the power of perseverance, continual self-improvement, and finding supportive people to keep in your corner. Much of her message connects to the role of a teacher. Being in the classroom is not for the faint of heart, and it requires knowledge as well as the drive to show up every day. However, the piece I find most compelling is the desire to improve the craft, reflect on shortcomings, and strive to continual improvement. Just like a dedicated dancer, in the life of a teacher, there is no final bow; the work continues each day.

I strive to keep refining and reframing my practice as I integrate new knowledge into my work, a process that is both humbling and inspiring. This process has deepened during my time as an M.Ed. student, particularly in the Creative Inquiry course. The readings from *On Being a Scholar-Practitioner: Practical Wisdom in Action* provided me with a conceptual understanding of the connection between theory and practice. In the introduction, the idea of a scholar-practitioner is brought forth. The authors describe this role as an "embodiment of a mindset" where "action informs understanding and understanding informs action" (Llewellyn et al, 1993, p. 3). For me, engaging in graduate work alongside teaching in the classroom did just that. During class discussions, I recalled moments in the classroom with my Pre-K students. Often, I acquired a new skill or strategy from class, and I immediately tried the approach the next day. This back and forth strengthened my conceptual knowledge as well as bolstered my skill set in the classroom. Graduate coursework contributed to my growing confidence in answering questions from families and using this knowledge

Within the framework of this writing, I became aware that my personal experiences and practical wisdom were valid additions to the process of developing this content. In the book From *Moment to Meaning: The Art of Scholar-Practitioner Inquiry,* the authors place value on personal moments as catalyst for inquiry and self-reflection. When this is outlined in Chapter 1, it is suggested that "our capacity to see and judge is shaped by who we are; what we believe; what we value; what we know; what we hope to accomplish" (Llewellyn et al, 2020, p. 14). These words served as an inspiration as this paper developed, and ultimately, how I approach work in the classroom. Embracing the scholarly narrative was difficult for me initially. During my time at Carlow, I found my rhythm in graduate school by discussing personal experiences in class, but I often relied more on my understanding of concepts and sources in written assignments. This approach posed a unique challenge. When Professor Piantanida suggested including a ballet metaphor or theme throughout my writing, I was skeptical. In many ways, I have pushed my identity as a ballerina aside to fully embrace my role as an educator. However, when I really sat with that suggestion and my evolving understanding of being a scholar-practitioner, it became clear. My "capacity" as *From Moment to Meaning* suggests is the sum of my parts, which happens to include 20 years of

intense ballet training and performances (Llewellyn et al., 2020, p. 14). My immense knowledge and love of the arts was part of the reason the Reggio Philosophy clicked with me, and that cycle of understanding and action deepened that connection.

Values embedded in the Reggio Philosophy augment my understanding of being both a reflective teacher and a scholar-practitioner. According to Wurm, "Starting to work with children Reggio ways must begin with a reflective practice." (2005, p. 5) Much like the process of crafting a Scholarly Practitioner Narrative, diving into the theory and practice behind the Reggio approach necessitates educators to constantly evaluate their process. Working in "Reggio ways" requires the combinations of pedagogical knowledge, compassionate relationships and communication, and a heightened awareness of one's own disposition. Naturally, a commitment to this work becomes vulnerable for its participants. Chaille captures how the vulnerability which teachers feel is similar to the experience of children diving into the unknown in constructivist learning. She calls this feeling "courage," which allows teachers and learners to find that balance of risk taking and support (2015, p. 40).

Yet, before any inquiry-based learning or relationship building can occur, the teacher requires their own level of care and attention. In their guide on trauma-sensitive classroom practices, Souers and Hall underscore how teachers pour themselves into caring and supporting others, without often doing the same for their own wellbeing; "we know what we should be doing to take care of ourselves, yet we struggle mightily with carrying it out" (2016, p. 44). Even more difficult, Souers and Hall point to the value of teachers knowing their own emotional or trauma triggers (2016). Thankfully, years in therapy have heightened my emotional awareness, and I often communicate my baseline mood with a trusted colleague. However, my experience teaching in-person during a COVID school year revealed how I struggle with self-care in a greater way. Looking back, I salvaged every morsel of energy and positivity in me to use when I was student-facing, often leaving my personal life feeling chaotic and unfulfilling. With hindsight, I know the 2020-2021 school year was an exceptional experience, and I worked intensely in the classroom out of perceived necessity. Fortunately, the summer months and engaging in this scholarly-practitioner work has allowed me form a deeper appreciation for self-care and wellness for teachers like me. In Sarah Forst's work entitled *The Teacher's Guide to Self-Care,* she includes a quote by Todd Whitaker, "The best thing about being a teacher is that it matters. The hardest thing about being a teacher is that it matters every day" (2020, p. 21). These words ring true in my experience thus far; I hold myself to high standards because I believe in the value committed teachers. I felt that weight each day in the classroom, but this also provides more reason to focus on nourishing myself with proper sleep, a balanced diet, joyful movement, and pleasurable activities with loved ones. Moving forward, I hope to find a healthier balance to sustain my passion and drive in the classroom.

Sustaining my passion would hopefully allow me to engage with the layers of practice included in this SPN. During this inquiry process, I am realizing that my conceptual and practical understanding is strongest in the Reggio Philosophy, followed by Trauma-Informed Care, and lastly Anti-racist Anti-bias work. As a white educator, becoming more engaged with Culturally Responsive Teaching and examining my bias will be a lifelong journey. From reading Ijeoma Oluo's work entitled *So You Want to Talk About Race*, I gained insight on how to approach difficult conversations around race in both the personal and professional arenas. According to Oluo, it is imperative to believe a non-white person's intention when they state a situation is "about race" (2020, p.14-19). Allowing that to seep in, I recognize that conversations around race may occur with children, colleagues, and families. My responsibility is to first listen and assume positive intention. Taking that one step further, working in an Anti-Racist Anti-Bias way, I need to be aware of my own bias, take the time to reflect on my words and actions, and make amends when wrong. In NAECY's position paper on equity, the authors pen this sentiment beautifully— "Take responsibility for biased actions, even if unintended, and actively work to repair the harm" (Advancing Equity, n.d.). This recommendations returns to the feeling of uncertainty and vulnerability, which can be unsettling; however, the ramifications of damaged relationships with a child, colleague, or

family are far worse. I am learning that the willingness to engage in difficult conversations is a constant in the intersection of a demanding philosophy with being mindful and responsive to all its constituents.

When tasked with discerning a topic, the elements came rather instinctively to me. Before embarking on this writing journey, I had a strong foundational base in the Reggio Philosophy and an emerging understanding and appreciation of both trauma-informed care and CRT. Using familiar resources from the Reggio Philosophy as a starting point, I was able to draw conceptual connections between the philosophies and these two educational frameworks. Through utilizing my initial understanding and reverence for the Reggio Philosophy as a lens, its theoretical and practical interplay with Trauma-Informed Care and CRT became apparent. During this process, I expanded my perspective of the Reggio Philosophy as the one true way, and I saw the intellectual and day to day implications of incorporating additional knowledge bases. I still view working in the Reggio-way as valid and meaningful, but engaging in this work has allowed me to see the strength of this type of philosophical and practical integration.

Finding the connection between these educational elements has demonstrated how the integration of separate parts creates a stronger whole. Through this culmination of my M.Ed. coursework and my own development as a teacher, I see the immense value of incorporating additional frameworks and practices into the fold. The symbiotic nature of these three elements demonstrates how separate parts can forge a stronger and meaningful perspective. Much like this combined perspective, the pieces of my identity and experiences can be integrated to be the responsive, intelligent, and passionate educator I strive to be. Ballet always required a sharp mind and a flexible spirit, just like teaching demands of me today. In my own way, I am going to keep dancing; just now it happens to be between the educational practices I am deeply passionate about.

Appendix 1:
THE HUNDRED LANGUAGES

Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini) Founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach

“No way. The hundred is there.

The child is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.

A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling, of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.

The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred
more) but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and at Christmas.

They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.

They tell the child:

that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.

And thus they tell the child \

that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there."

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