

## When Self-Portraiture Inspired a Shift in Thinking Together Maplewood-Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center St. Louis, Missouri

Educators at the Maplewood-Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center, preschool through 1<sup>st</sup> grade, in St. Louis had been reading and thinking about Reggio-inspired learning for some time. A pedagogista was hired to work with teachers and children in the fall of 2006. Reggio-inspired work began in earnest.

The image of the child began to be seen in the hallways of the school through photographs on identity boards outside of each preschool classroom. Accompanying self-portraits were initiated by the pedagogista. The classroom teachers became intrigued and quickly assumed support of this ongoing work with the children. As the identity boards of photographs and self-portraits began to be posted in the hallways, teachers, children and family members from throughout the school began to stop and admire the results of each child's image.

The preschool educators soon recognized the importance of these self-portraits in relation to the children's and their own learning. One teacher said, "At first, scaffolding the skills for drawing a self-portrait seemed odd to me. However, when I thought about how we might support the writing of letters to improve the effort, it seemed fine to use similar language and techniques for drawing." Children voiced their pleasure regarding the results of their work. A child said, "I drew my teeth and they look like my dad's teeth...wow!" While educators were documenting these responses, they did not fully anticipate how the portraits would become a tool for communicating the depth of this new way of thinking and doing to others.

Early one morning as the pedagogista came out into the hallway, she saw a parent taking a photograph of his child's self-portrait panel. While pleased at this father's interest, she was also curious and asked why he was taking a picture. He replied, "These drawings of the children are so great. I want a picture of them to hang in our living room." The pedagogista was profoundly moved. All of the educators became increasingly aware of family members' interest that the self-portraits were generating.

In collaborative meetings preparing for fall conferences, the teachers decided to use the self-portraits as a focus for dialogue. Describing the process of the self-portraits provided an insight for parents regarding the relationships being built between children and teachers as they collaborated on this meaningful work. The developing observational, expressive and reflective skills of the children especially came to light in these conference dialogues. This particular conference was so different in comparison to previous conferences that dealt more with checklists and standardized assessments. Both parents and teachers came away from these meetings filled with appreciation for the children's work and with excitement for what might be possible in the coming months.

At the NAREA conference in June of 2007 Carlina Rinaldi was describing the challenges of inviting parents to partner in the research of children and teachers working together in early childhood classrooms. She stated, "Life is research!" It became clear to the educators that the conversations regarding the self-portraits were an invitation for them to join in the research the children and teachers had begun.

