

The Reggio Approach

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The Reggio Approach started in Reggio Emilia, a prosperous region in Northern Italy, and is the site of one of the most innovative, high-quality city-run infant-toddler and pre-primary systems in the world. The Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education draws from the ideas of many great thinkers, yet it is much more than an eclectic mix of theories. The essential role and intimate involvement of parents in their children's education is, to this day, a fundamental element of the Reggio Emilia Approach. The Reggio Emilia approach to education talks about three educators as being in the classroom at any one time: the teacher, the child, and the environment. This methodology is practiced with children from infants to preschool age. The project approach is based on John Dewey's work (1916/1966) and his belief that curriculum should be grounded in children's experiences.

The roll of a teacher in a Reggio classroom is not what is traditionally recognized as a preschool teacher. There are many different roles that the teachers take on in the classroom. One teacher takes on the responsibility of being *the co-learner or the collaborator*, their job is best demonstrated when the child and teacher engage in collaborative learning during the process of working through a project. Another role is the teacher as *the guide and the facilitator*, is consistent with Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), within which adults provide scaffolding to assist children in their learning and consequent development (Diaz, Neal, & Amaya-Williams, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). The *teacher as the researcher*, is the person in the classroom who is responsible for facilitating children's learning according to their

interests, questions, curiosity, and current understandings. Through observing and listening to the children, following up with collection and analysis of data the teacher is able to ascertain critical knowledge concerning the children's growth, development and learning. The last role and probably the most important component of the teaching team *the teacher as the reflective practitioner* which is carried out by all the teachers. Most important that the teacher engages in continuous reflection during which they questions that which she and others have previously assumed to be unquestionable (Filippini, 1993; McCarthy, 1995).

The Child in a Reggio Classrooms role is defined as, children have rights and not just needs the fundamental belief on which the image of the child is constructed. If the children had legitimate rights, then they also should have opportunities to develop their intelligence, and to be made ready for the success that would not, and should not, escape them. *The Child as an Active Constructor of Knowledge*, The concept of the child having rights, and thereby possessing strength, competence, and potential, informs a view of the child as a protagonist, occupying the primary active role in their education and learning. *The Child as a Researcher*, within the Reggio Emilia Approach, the role of the child as researcher takes place within the context projects, or "in-depth stud[ies] of a particular topic that one or more children undertake" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 2). *The Child as a Social Being*, Reggio Emilia Approach draws from Piaget's ideas, it also has sought to expand and overturn many of his theories (Malaguzzi, 1993b; Rankin, 1997). It places a strong emphasis on children's social construction of knowledge through their relationships (Malaguzzi, 1993a) within the context of collaboration, dialogue, conflict,

negotiation, and cooperation with peers and adults (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1993; Gandini, 1993b).

The Environment the Third teacher in the Classroom, education is often understood as the sole responsibility of parents and teachers. Reggio Emilia identifies a 3rd teacher between child, teacher, and parent: the environment. In its attention to how space can be thoughtfully arranged, Reggio Emilia has reconceptualized space as a key source of educational provocation and insight. We do not usually recognize the environment as alive like a person is, instead the product of human imagination at work. “Reggio Emilia approach does, we can begin to notice how our surroundings can take on a life of their own that contributes to children’s learning” Fraser (2006). In her work with preservice teachers, eight Reggio principles have been discovered as key to the environment as third teacher: *aesthetics, transparency, active learning, flexibility, collaboration, reciprocity, bringing the outdoors in, and relationships*. A Reggio Emilia approach involves maintaining a delicate balance between providing structure and encouraging children’s free exploration. A Reggio Emilia approach advocates that teachers pay close attention to the myriad of ways that space can be made to “speak” and invite interaction, (Cadwell, 2003; Fraser, 2006), such as positioning small mirrors around the classroom or placing easels close to natural sunlight. Educators can introduce “provocations” meant to surprise children and spark discussion; other strategies include bringing in realistic objects for children to use in their play, such as different colors and shapes of pasta in the dramatic play area. From a child’s perspective, such small changes animate the environment, making it feel electric and alive. Children come to care for

their surroundings as well as see them in unexpected ways, which becomes part of a planned approach to curriculum and evaluation that is organized around expecting the unexpected. This approach to curriculum planning is called the negotiated curriculum or emergent curriculum, teachers engage in a recursive cycle of design, documentation, and discourse. They introduce a provocation. They listen closely to children's conversations as they engage with their surroundings. They document the children's learning using such devices as note-taking, sketches, tape recording, video recording, and photographs, so as to create a visible trace of the learning process. Documentation is a living testimony to interactions that happen within a social space. Children love to create their own worlds at their own scale in any environment they can manipulate or modify. What children also value most in their environment are opportunities for social affiliation and creative exploration or self-development.

The project approach employs children's natural inclinations to use the arts as a language for exploring a topic (Malaguzzi, 1998). Drawing, painting, modeling, and construction are all used to deepen the children's understanding of the topic and allow them to represent their understandings in concrete ways. Malaguzzi, the former director of the schools in Reggio Emilia, described the visual arts as one of the "hundred languages" of children (1998). The visual arts allowed the children to use the arts as a language for learning and expression. Open access to materials provided independence in using this language and open-ended materials provided a means for children to be problem solvers. The need for independence was satisfied throughout the visual arts.

The Reggio Emilia Approach to educating young children is strongly influenced by a unique image of the child and deeply embedded within the surrounding culture. It is neither a model nor recipe with a set of guidelines and procedures to be followed; therefore, one cannot and should not attempt to simply import it to another location. Rather, it must be carefully uncovered and redefined according to one's own culture in order to successfully affect practice elsewhere. We also must remember when educating the young people of today that it is not only the responsibility of the parent, and teacher but the environment also. The intimate involvement of parents in their children's education is, to this day, a fundamental element of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

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Loris Malaguzzi and The Reggio Approach to Early Childhood Education

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It was Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) who became the inspiration behind the educational experiences in Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi was a primary school teacher who later went on to study psychology and brought to his lifetime work in education, his interests and experience in theatre, journalism, sport and politics. He is remembered by his colleagues as a very strong character but highly collaborative. Malaguzzi described himself as stubborn, with an iron will. He wanted to win and to carry along with himself everyone who thought like himself, better than himself or differently from himself. As a result, Malaguzzi worked tirelessly with colleagues in Reggio to further his understanding of how children learn, and to publicize his passionate belief in his image of the competent, confident child.

The first preschool in Reggio Emilia originated after Liberation Day in 1945. Reggio Emilia is a modern, dynamic city that combines economic prosperity with social and ecological responsibility. In the village of Villa Cella, close to Reggio, money was made available from the sale of a tank, a few horses and a truck abandoned by the retreating Nazis. The men of the village suggested building a theatre but the women wanted to build a preschool to provide a new form of education that would ensure that they would never bring up a generation of children who would tolerate injustice and inequality.

The earliest preschools were built by local families and communities in a period of adversity and hardship. Over the next 40 years a network of preschools and infant-toddler centres developed.

Up until the 1970s, in Italy, preschools had been the responsibility of the Catholic Church and now more parents were demanding secular education for their children. In 1970, the first infant-toddler centre for children aged three months to three years was opened in response to the demands of working mothers. The centres became providers of early childhood education in environments that were appropriate to the child's level of development in order to overcome resistance of the Church and the fear that these centres would lead to the breakdown of the family.

Political opposition remained until 1976 when preschools were opened up to public scrutiny. The parents and the community confirmed their support for the guiding principles of the Reggio Approach to early

childhood education, creating a strong relationship between the preschools and the community.

Over time, Malaguzzi and other educators in Reggio gathered their ideas and opinions from many sources. In developing their approach they sought information from theories and philosophies of education, most notably the work of Montessori.

Fundamental to the Reggio philosophy is the image of the child as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent.' The child is recognised as having his or her own values, who wants to be respected and valued for himself as well as holding respect for others and who embodies a curiosity and open-mindedness to all that is possible. Children are encouraged to develop their own theories about the world and how it works through exploration.

Crucial features of this approach include:

- Active involvement from parents in the development and management of early childhood services.
- Contributions from parents towards the cost of their child's education depending on their income level.
- All children are catered for – those with disabilities are considered to have 'special rights' rather than 'special needs'.
- Teachers are viewed as enthusiastic learners and researchers and not as imparters of knowledge.
- Each group of children has two teachers who remain with them throughout their time at school.
- The role of the atelierista – a practising artist who supports the development of children's learning, creativity and imagination – is central to the Reggio approach.

In 1980 international interest in this approach gained momentum with exhibitions throughout Europe. In 1991, the American magazine Newsweek named the Diana preschool as the most avant-garde early childhood institution in the world, leading to huge interest from the United States and the rest of the world.

After Malaguzzi's unexpected death, the community of Reggio Emilia resolved to carry on and implement his dreams and fulfil the Reggio

mission 'to enhance the potential of all children'. A foundation named Reggio Children was established as the International Centre for the Defence and Promotion of the Rights and Potential of All Children.

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What is Reggio Emilia? *Compiled By: Dana McVey (7/2010)*



The Reggio Emilia approach is a unique take on teaching –one which makes parents, teachers, and children equal shareholders in the learning initiative.

Reggio Emilia is an approach to education from a city in of the same name in Italy which focuses on the educational importance of community and free inquiry as its primary values. Since its development in the 1940's, the Reggio approach has spread into a worldwide network of preschools and kindergartens.

Although the Reggio approach shares some of the values of the better-known Waldorf and Montessori schools, it's not a philosophy with a set system of beliefs. Rather, it's an approach based around certain fundamental values about how children learn. “These values are interpreted in different schools, different contexts, and different ways,” says

Susan Lyon, Executive Director of The Innovative Teacher Project, which aims to develop and promote Reggio inspired education.

Just what are these core values? Here's an introduction:

- **The child as an active participant in learning.** The Reggio approach “sees a child as a very competent protagonist and initiator, who interacts with their environment,” says Lyon. Andra Young, head teacher of a Reggio inspired school in San Francisco's Presidio State Park, says that students are allowed to follow their own interests, but that “it's not willy-nilly.” For example, she says, students in her classroom were showing an interest in building, so she brought wood stumps and building materials into the classroom. While exploring how to hammer nails, the children were given the opportunity to reinforce math skills, problem-solving, and emerging literacy –all in relationship to their hands-on project.
- **The significance of environment.** “The environment of the school is seen as the third educator,” after the teacher and the parent, says Lyon. Most Reggio classrooms include a studio, or “atelier,” which is filled with materials such as clay, paint, and writing implements. Children use these materials to represent concepts that they are learning in a hands-on way.
- **The teacher, parent, and child as collaborators in the process of learning.** “Normally,” says Lyon, “parents are not seen as part of the educational process in an authentic way.” But the Reggio approach views the parent as an essential resource for their child's learning. To foster community, Reggio schools host a variety of events throughout each school year, including conferences and special lectures for parents. “For example, a teacher observed that a lot of parents were complaining that their children weren't sleeping well,” Lyon says. The school responded by bringing someone in to speak to parents about the issue.
- **Making learning visible.** “The teacher observes and documents the daily life of the school to make learning visible,” says Lyon. In Reggio inspired classrooms, teachers use a variety of documentation methods, such as cameras, tape recorders, and journals, to track children's thoughts and ideas as they play together or work with materials. For example, says Young, each child has a portfolio binder, including photographs of their projects, quotes from the child, artwork, and writing samples. “It's kind of like a narrative of what the child learns at school,” says Young, noting that the children take great pride and satisfaction in their portfolios.

Although adapting the values of the Reggio Emilia approach can be challenging for teachers, Young says it's worth it. “Validating the children's work and supporting the child to go deeper into their perception of the world is the most important part of the process.” Parents and teachers will agree: it's never too soon to start giving your child a nose for knowledge and the tools to investigate the world.

