

## **The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood**

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The glass-walled Diana School in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia looks more like a cheerful greenhouse than a public kindergarten. Children's art is everywhere—on walls, painted on windows, hanging on the ceilings, spread across tables. There are ceramic tiles of sea horses, a mobile of human profiles made of wire and beads, and clay figurines of trees and leaves. Two dressing areas offer costumes for children who might want to "disguise" themselves for the day.

This is from a 1991 *Newsweek* article "The Ten Best Schools in the World," in which the Reggio Emilia preschools were picked as an example of excellence in early childhood education.

In his book *The Disciplined Mind*, developmental psychologist Howard Gardner concurs that Reggio Emilia's 22 municipal preschools and 13 infant-toddler centers can be considered the best in the world. He describes the Reggio preschool buildings: spacious classrooms with ample windows; indoor space flowing into outdoor play areas; potted plants, couches and simple, beautiful furniture creating special corners where children meet and work in small groups. All classrooms open to a large central piazza for children's activities and meetings with parents and the community. Each classroom is equipped with a mini atelier where hundreds of materials—from those brought from home to grains of cereal, seashells, small stones, sands and fabrics to any kind of colored paper—are neatly stored. Young children engage in different activities and develop long-term projects corresponding to their own interests.

### **The Birth of the Reggio Emilia Approach**

Loris Malaguzzi, the father and founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, was a visionary Italian teacher. In the aftermath of World War II, he threw his energies into supporting the cooperative preschool movement begun by a group of women in the city of Reggio. During the 60s and 70s, Malaguzzi expanded their grass-roots project and, with the city's financial support, formed innovative preschools influenced by the works of Dewey, Froebel, Vygotsky, Piaget and Ciari and, later, Bateson, Hawkins, Bruner and Gardner.

Infant-toddler centers, or *asili nido* ("nido" means "nest" in Italian), and preschools were set up. The preschools were generally composed of 3 to 4 classrooms of about 25 children, ages 3 to 6; there were two teachers in each classroom. The staff included an *atelierista*, with a degree in the visual arts, and a *pedagogista*, the school's educational advisor. The preschool management was community-based: teachers, atelierista, pedagogista and parents were involved in the school's life continuously and in many different ways.

Here was a new way to think about the nature of the child as a learner; the role of the teacher; the design and use of physical space and environment; curriculum planning; and community involvement and management. Over the decades, this distinctive and innovative system of early-childhood pedagogy and organization, now known as the Reggio Emilia Approach, grew into a model of excellence. The Reggio schools have won several

prizes: in 1992, the Danish LEGO Prize and the Kohl International Education Award; and in 1994, the Hans Christian Andersen prize. In 1997, the municipality of Reggio began a collaborative project with the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The Reggio Emilia Approach has become an international role model in Europe, the United States and, recently, South America and several Asian countries.

### **The Image of the Child, and The Hundred Languages of Children**

The Reggio Emilia Approach treats children as active protagonists of their own process of growth: they have extraordinary potential for learning and possess infinite affective, relational, sensorial and intellectual resources. Their need to communicate and interact with others emerges at birth. They have potential and plasticity, curiosity, the desire to grow, the ability to be amazed. Each child has the right to be respected, recognized and valued in his own identity, uniqueness, difference and rhythm of development and growth.

Loris Malaguzzi believed that each child is endowed with a “hundred languages,” including words, movements, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, dramatic play, music and much more. These are ways of thinking, of expressing, of understanding and of encountering others that connects rather than separates the various meanings of experiences. The hundred languages (which suggest a natural correspondence to Howard Gardner's “multiple intelligences”) are a metaphor of the extraordinary potential of children, of the processes of knowing and creating, and of the many forms in which life is manifested and knowledge constructed. They are dispositions that transform and multiply, in cooperation and in interaction among languages, among children, and among children and adults. It is the responsibility of preschools to value all languages, verbal and non-verbal, giving equal dignity to each. Each child is an active constructor of knowledge, competence and autonomy—and of experiences to which she is capable of giving meaning and significance.

Relationships with peers, adults and the environment inform children’s unique and original learning processes. These processes emphasize strategies of research, negotiation, and co-participation characterized by creativity, uncertainty, intuition and curiosity; they are generated by experiences that are playful, aesthetic, emotional and relational, highlighting the centrality of motivation and of the pleasure of learning.

### **The Reggio Emilia Teacher**

The Reggio Emilia Approach requires teachers with an intelligent sensitivity and special empathy towards children. Teachers must possess the habit of questioning their certainties; a great deal of awareness and availability; a critical style of research; and the skills to talk, listen and learn from children and their parents. It is their responsibility to organize the classroom environment and its rich and various materials in a way that makes the classrooms “amiable environments,” beautiful and engaging spaces.

The interaction between children and teachers is one of the remarkable aspects of the Reggio Emilia Approach. Teachers are researchers and guides to the children; at the same time they are eager to learn alongside them. They give children endless ways and opportunities to express themselves and their potential. They carefully observe and listen, collecting children’s comments and intuitions and turning them into problems to be solved by the children themselves in different ways and through various projects. Above all, Reggio Emilia teachers are engaged in listening, observing, and understanding the

strategies that children use in a learning situation. As a consequence, the teacher-child relationship in the Reggio schools is rich with problem teaching and problem solving. It is centered on a genuine conversation about work that the children are doing, rather than being caught up in managerial issues, the routines and rules of classroom life, or directions and recommendations to the children about their behavior.

Teacher documentation is a central activity in a Reggio-inspired school: a steady flow of information is always on display for parents, other teachers and the children themselves. Posters, photos, videos, audio recordings, written notes, portfolios and final products of different projects are all ways of documenting the school's life and activities. Systematic documentation serves three functions: it provides children with visible traces of what they have done, stimulating them to the next step in their learning process; it provides teachers with clues and indications for the next research project; it provides parents with effective information about their children and the work done at school. The educational experience acquires full meaning when the documentation constructed during the school's daily life is reviewed, reconstructed, re-examined and evaluated by the team of teachers.

### **The Pedagogista and the Atelierista**

In each Reggio preschool—with about 75 children in 3 to 4 classrooms, and two teachers in each classroom—there are two specialized teachers in action. One is the pedagogista, an educational adviser who works with the municipality and with the schools, spending the majority of the time at schools with the teachers and children, and dealing also with parents. It is the pedagogista's role to help teachers improve their skills of observing and listening to the children, documenting projects, and promoting and conducting research. Also, the pedagogista supports teachers and works with them to identify themes and experiences for professional development and in-service training. With the pedagogista as the liaison between the schools and the municipality, there is a system of open communication lines that helps the whole community work in harmony.

The atelierista oversees the atelier, the core of the Reggio Emilia Approach and its main highlight. A large art studio within the school, the atelier is equipped and organized with a broad variety of materials, well sorted and accessible to the children. The atelier serves two functions: it offers a place for children to become masters of all kinds of techniques, such as painting, drawing, working with light and shadows, and modeling clay; it also helps teachers understand how children invent autonomous vehicles of expressive and cognitive freedom. Besides the large school atelier, each classroom space is equipped with a mini-atelier: the quantity of work and products to be displayed and the acquisition of new technological tools created the need for these satellites.

With special qualifications in art education, the atelierista can help teachers see the visual possibilities of themes and projects that might not be so apparent to them. The atelierista helps the other teachers and the children to organize and carry out large ongoing projects as well as smaller independent activities. Acting as a consultant, the atelierista meets with the teachers several times a day, showing them how to introduce new concepts to the children, stimulate their curiosity, and guide them on possible paths of learning; efforts are made to circulate new ideas among all the teachers. It is also the atelierista's role to provide workshops for documentation, and serve as the main editor and designer of the documentation of the work done at school.

## **The Design and Use of Physical Space, the Environment as Third Teacher**

Visitors of Reggio Emilia pre-primary schools always note the appeal of the physical space. The special care for the appearance of the environment and a strong sense of beauty, along with the design of spaces that favor social interaction, are essential elements of the Italian culture.

At the Diana School, one of the most renowned Reggio pre-primary schools, there is a central common space called the piazza, Italian for “city square.” All the other classrooms and spaces, including the atelier and a technology library, open towards the piazza. There are glass walls to create continuity between interior green corners and outside gardens; they contribute natural light and give the opportunity to play with transparencies and reflections. The ceilings host many different types of aerial sculptures or mobiles, all made with transparent and unusual materials.

Reggio Emilia classrooms offer a variety of opportunities to the children: a mini-atelier in which to work alone or in small groups, corners with carpets and pillows in which to read books and listen to stories, open shelves with transparent containers displaying all sorts of pre-selected materials like pasta in different shapes and size, fabric samples, all sorts of paper of different textures and colors.

According to the Reggio Approach, social interaction is seen as essential to the learning process. Through shared activities, interactions, communication, cooperation and even conflicts, children co-construct their knowledge of the world. Therefore the space is organized and set up in ways that facilitate children's interactions in large as well as small groups. The space has to guarantee the well-being of each child and of the group as a whole.

In addition to their aesthetic sensibility and attention to detail, Reggio Emilia schools are known for their abundant display of children's work. There is no stereotypical indulgence of common cartoons or excessive use of primary colors to brighten classrooms. Instead, children are guided to enjoy aspects of the environment that provide genuine aesthetic pleasure, such as mirrors, lights and shadows, and translucent spaces and objects. Children are stimulated to closer exploration and appreciation of the physical environment and to display all their work in a visual dialogue with classroom environment, objects and materials. The abundance of their work and the way it is exhibited in the classroom environment reflects the serious attention that adults pay to children's activities and products. The environment is seen as educating the child; it is considered to be “the third teacher” in the classroom. To this aim, it is kept very flexible, undergoing frequent modifications, in accordance with the needs of new projects and allowing the children to remain active protagonists in constructing their own knowledge.

## **The Emergent Curriculum**

According to the Italian pedagogical traditions, there is no division between day-care institutions and “schools”; all pre-primary institutions provide education and care at the same time. Under recent governmental guidelines, preschools are assigned a set of curricular goals. Children are expected to meet objectives in five pre-disciplinary areas or “fields of experience”:

- The self and social development;
- Physical movements and body awareness;
- Verbal languages;

- Non-verbal languages, including visual arts, music and drama; and
- Knowledge of the world, including environment explorations and projects, pre-math and pre-science activities.

Early childhood educators can implement the framework by planning for each activity specific objectives that correspond to the mandated general objectives. Or, as in Reggio-inspired schools, they can plan general objectives without identifying specific objectives in advance.

Working in teams, Reggio teachers formulate and plan a project, which is an in-depth study of an event, phenomenon, or idea brought to the attention of the classroom by a group of children guided by the teachers. The teachers hypothesize what might happen, based on their knowledge of the children and on previous experiences. Projects can be short or long term, depending on the children's ongoing interest and on discoveries of new paths made along the way.

An emergent curriculum is generated by the interests of the children, as well as by teachers' observations and analysis of their interaction with their peers and with adults. All knowledge emerges therefore in this process of self and social construction; the child is seen as a social constructivist. The emergent curriculum stresses equally the importance of both the child as a constructive learner and the teacher as researcher, and as the adult who provides structures and organized systems of meanings. It is child-centered and teacher-directed at the same time.

### **Community Involvement and Management**

Since its beginning, Reggio Emilia's system of pre-primary schools and infant toddler centers has been known for its community-based management. The participation of parents and the community in the overall educational project reflects an awareness that the job of educating a child is a very complex and delicate one: it requires support and solidarity; the sharing of ideas; multiple physical encounters; a plurality of views, and the ability to take all of them into account; and many different competencies.

Each preschool appoints an Advisory Council composed of teachers and educators; representatives of the municipality of Reggio; and parents elected by their fellow parents to represent them. The Advisory Council meets often throughout the academic year and periodically reports to the municipality of Reggio ideas, concerns, proposals and the results of educational assessments.

Parents also actively participate in the life of the school in other ways. They meet with teachers individually or in small groups to discuss classroom activities; they also attend sessions with experts set up at their request. Parent and teacher meetings might also include "work sessions," in which they build together new furniture, reorganize the educational space, or prepare materials to be used in an upcoming project. They also participate in lab activities called "learning by doing," where parents and teachers acquire educational techniques such as working with paper to make *origami* or booklets, making puppets, working with the shadow theater, and using photographic equipment.

Needless to say, this sort of collaboration requires parents concerned for the well-being of their own children as well as of all the children in the school, and requires teachers with strong commitment and enthusiasm, available to spend many hours in meetings with colleagues, parents, educators and community representatives. In the end, this is the

prototype of a school which resembles an extended family: there is a high level of professionalism, as an excellent school would require, and there is the caring, support and good balance of give-and-take that is the quintessence of a real family.

### **Reggio Emilia Comes to the United States**

The Reggio Emilia Approach landed in the United States in 1986, thanks to Loris Malaguzzi's initiative to send an exhibit entitled "The Hundred Languages of Children," with an English catalogue, to San Francisco. Lella Gandini, now the Reggio Children Liaison in the U.S. for Dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach and Adjunct Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst had published a 1984 magazine article introducing American educators and early childhood teachers to this innovative educational approach. With the collaboration of other American professors, she began to tour and give presentations. In 1985, Dr. Gandini accompanied Howard Gardner on a trip to Reggio Emilia, where he visited the preschools and met with Loris Malaguzzi. This was the beginning of a long-lasting collaboration between the city of Reggio and the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Part of Dr. Gandini's early information campaign was that first exhibit conceived by Loris Malaguzzi and Reggio's educators and administrators. First brought to New York City by Scholastic, the exhibit traveled worldwide for over 25 years. A new exhibit, "The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children" is now traveling in the United States and other countries. Hosted by schools and museums and accompanied by lectures, seminars and laboratories, this 6,000 sq. ft. interactive and ever-changing exhibit has been set up in libraries, malls, museums, hotels, statehouses and universities throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Membership in the North America Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA), founded in 2002 to spread the Reggio Emilia philosophy, has grown steadily. It has been estimated that there are now at least 20 Reggio Emilia-inspired schools in the New York City; most of them are private, some are public. Many teachers have participated in Reggio Emilia training, and have even traveled to Reggio Emilia for a Study Tour or met with its educators in professional development sessions.

One of the goals of the NAREA is to bring to the American audience a greater awareness of this innovative educational methodology. Drawing as it does from psychological, philosophical and pedagogical traditions and schools of thinking from throughout the western world, the Reggio Emilia Approach serves well the needs of preschool children in the 21st century.

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### **References**

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The Reggio approach has been of interest to early childhood centers and schools world wide, especially in the last thirty years, because of its inclusivity of all children and its many unique approaches to education (Gilman, 2007). The Reggio approach has not only been called the "gold standard" (Moss, 2005), but a stimulator for reflection and questioning of current educational practices (Warash, 2008), "an example of utopian thought and action" (Moss, 2005, p. 25), and as "one of the best systems of education in the world" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1993, p. 3). The Reggio.Â Reggio Emilia Approach 4. analytical construct The ideal type "can be used to analyze a general, suprahistorical phenomenon or historically unique occurrences" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideal\\_type](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideal_type)).