

Running head: THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH

The Reggio Emilia Approach:
Collaborative Learning Through Research and Reflection
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Research Topic

With the conclusion of WWII, a wave of social activism struck Europe, leading toward a push for education reform in parts of Italy. Discontent with the Catholic Church's restrictive, authoritative approach to education had risen and a movement for change began. Secular parent-run schools were erected, but the educational approach to implement was unclear. Grappling with this challenge, a group of teachers in Reggio Emilia, Italy under the guidance of Loris Malaguzzi, embarked on a study to develop a progressive, constructivist approach in the holistic education of children from birth to age six through a process of collaboration, observation, documentation, and reflection. This study has become known as the Reggio Emilia approach to education.

Research Problems

In the initial stages of creating a secular early childhood school, the teachers of Reggio Emilia struggled with providing a warm, spacious, and stimulating environment for learning. Ways to encourage parental and community support and involvement were also concerns. Another problem was discovering and acquiring the resources necessary to assist students in their communication of ideas, questions, feelings, and understanding. As well, the problem of developing differentiated motivational stimuli to enhance individual growth and progress while students engage in collaborative activities, needed to be addressed. As these teacher-researchers began to examine these issues, they came to the realization that things about children and for children are only learned from children. This principle provided the inspiration and foundation for a long-term study of children through which the teachers could discover ways to guide the development of the child's intellectual, emotional, social, and moral potentials.

Purpose Statement

Based on the awareness of the desire for change within the community, the teachers of Reggio Emilia studied the philosophies of educational thinkers such as Dewey, Froebel, Doise, Berger, Vygotsky, and Piaget to obtain a starting point. The research would move them forward from there. As Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (1998) state:

The purpose of this educational project, so say the educators in Reggio Emilia (Department of Early Education, 1984), is to produce a *reintegrated child*, capable of constructing his or her own powers of thinking through the synthesis of all the expressive, communicative, and cognitive languages. (p. 457)

The teachers of Reggio Emilia wanted to create a supportive environment conducive to the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and children, a place where children are proactive in their learning and are provided the tools to communicate their growth and understanding using alternative language forms.

Research Questions

This attitude to move forward through research is a core element of the Reggio philosophy of pedagogy and has sustained the project over 40 years. Loris Malaguzzi reflects:

At the beginning, we knew nothing. We were illiterate about childhood and illiterate about education. But we had a lot of questions inside. We had so much desire to know and so many questions to ask. We knew that we didn't know. (Spaggiari, n.d., p. 1)

As the project took shape, the following questions surfaced: How do children and teachers view themselves as learners? How does the learning environment, both in and out of the classroom, affect the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the child? Does the creation of controlled conflict between students result in emotional and intellectual depression or growth?

In what manner(s) do children best communicate their ideas, emotions, questions, and understanding? How can the school reflect the changing needs of the community? How does a child develop a sense of self-identity and autonomy while working in a collaborative, reciprocative environment? What is the teacher's role in the classroom?

Throughout this exploration of the Reggio Emilia project, it is important to keep in mind that the Reggio teachers view this as a dynamic process and therefore, their research issues are constantly being modified or expanded.

Findings

Organizational Structure

When asked about the organizational structure of the education system, Loris Malaguzzi shares:

We think of a school for young children as an integral living organism, as a place of shared lives and relationships among many adults and very many children....

It has also been important to us that our living system of schooling expands toward the world of the families, with their right to know and to participate. And then it expands toward the city, with its own life, its own patterns of development, its own institutions, as we have asked the city to adopt the children as bearers and beneficiaries of their own specific rights. (Edwards et al., 1998, pp. 62, 63)

The organizational structure of the Reggio Emilia educational system for early childhood is unique in that it not only reflects the Reggio philosophy, but encompasses the city's cultural values as well. For this reason, a brief overview of the system is an essential aspect in the exploration of this study.

To appreciate the importance of partnerships among the community, parents, teachers, and students, one need only look back on the region's cultural history. It is a region of collectivist tendencies, a region where ideas of participatory democracy and civic community are fundamental to the culture. Everyone in Reggio Emilia is a valued citizen, no matter how young or old. Even the youngest of children are considered responsible, capable citizens. Each individual is encouraged to play an active role in community affairs. For centuries, people in this region from all social classes have come together to solve the communities' problems.

This element of community participation is reflected in the schools organizational structure. Those in titled positions are both elected and appointed. The top two positions, mayor and assessore, are held by non-educators. The assessore is in charge of all public education in the city. The director is responsible for the preprimary schools and infant-toddler centers. The main governing authority of the schools comes from the Representatives of the Advisory Council. This group is a combination of parents, citizens, and educators who collectively make major decisions for the schools. Their input is derived from meetings of the individual Advisory Councils from each school. The pedagoga travels between several schools and serves as a consultant and resource person for teachers. As pedagogical director, this individual is there to assist teachers in moving forward through hypothesis generation and with the creation of new patterns of educational practice. Each school also has an atelierista. This individual is an art educator who supports teachers in curriculum development and documentation. The atelierista plays a vital role in discovering and introducing different modes of communication for the children. This educator also aids in the process of interpreting the children's works as part of the research process. The remaining individuals and those most vital to the study are the staff, teachers, and students within the schools.

Included in this collectivist philosophy is the importance of relationships. Reggio educators believe a person's interactions with others deeply affects one's social and cognitive development. Reciprocity, the exchange of thoughts and ideas, plays a significant role in these relationships. It's an essential element in the Reggio approach to education.

Environment

The design of the early childhood centers of Reggio Emilia is the result of many hours of research and discussion. Knowing the affect of light on mood and attitude, windows serve as walls to allow as much light into the building as possible. Glass walls are also used on the interior to promote a sense of openness and unity between classes. Plenty of overhead light, both natural and artificial, is included in the design as well. This bright, open setting creates a positive atmosphere in which students feel comfortable with exploration and expression.

The rooms of the center are spacious and are positioned around a central region called the piazza. The piazza of the school mimics the one in the center of town. It serves as a gathering place, a place for activities, games, and for relationships to blossom. It is a compliment to the classroom and reinforces the community atmosphere of the center.

The classrooms actually have two contiguous spaces, one larger section for cooperative work and a smaller space to provide students with a place to retreat when individual time is needed. The rooms are full of materials for inquiry and discovery. Many of the walls of the classrooms and halls are covered with displays of the students' work along with the teachers' documentation. This serves a dual purpose. One is to provide information to the public and parents regarding the activities and learning within the center and the other is to stimulate children's thinking by re-examining previous works.

The entrance to the school serves as the main information center for parents, but also provides a relaxing atmosphere so parents do not feel rushed to move on. Chairs are provided for parents to sit in with their children as they inquire about and discuss the day's activities. Many of the children's works are displayed here for parents to see. It is a warm and friendly environment that encourages exploration, questions, and support from the parents and community.

The core research center of the school is the atelier, the school studio and laboratory. It is here that children are provided a space to experiment and manipulate many forms of visual communication. This can occur in combination with verbal communication or alone. Here many of the one hundred languages of children are born. It is a place where teachers learn about children through their many forms of expression. The atelier is an area where exploration, expression, documentation and decoding occur. In addition to the main atelier, there are mini-ateliers outside of each classroom to provide additional space for long-term projects. This allows for projects to continue for extended periods of time, even up to one year, as long as the children's interest is there.

Teachers and Learning

Theory. The pedagogy of Reggio Emilia's teachers is guided by the following theory: Knowledge is gradually constructed by people becoming each other's student, by taking a reflective stance toward each other's constructs, and by honoring the power of each other's initial perspective for negotiating a better understanding of subject matter (see Jankowicz, 1995; and Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The theory further holds that knowledge is never verifiable through listening or by observation alone, but rather it gains clarity through a negotiated analysis of the communication process itself. (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 239)

In short, they believe learning is negotiated between students and teachers. Children are encouraged to talk about how they represent what they know while teachers seek to uncover a child's beliefs, understanding, and interpretation of a topic, using this knowledge as the driving force behind the curriculum. The process is a joint effort.

Negotiated learning. There are three main components to negotiated learning. They are design, documentation, and discourse. A design is an activity in which children record their intentions or solutions. This can be presented in many forms such as drawing, painting, or sculpture. These communicative works created by the children provide a wonderful and important source of information for the teachers to analyze and to assist them in their daily planning.

The atelierista plays a very important role in assisting the children in the discovery of various visual modes of expression. The children may be introduced to acting, sculpting, or mapping, as well as other forms. They are not restricted to the traditional written and oral languages, but are free to incorporate these forms with the visual. Having the freedom to choose a mode of expression opens up many doors for children and stimulates creative thinking. The atelierista is there to provide the children with the resources and guidance they may need to communicate their emotions, questions, or understanding. This is not a formal art class. It is an opportunity for children to incorporate the visual arts into their projects as an additional language form. The desired form of expression chosen by the child is often inspired by the other children's works displayed around the school.

The incorporation of designs in the educational process is the first step in encouraging children to be protagonists in their learning. Designs are created as a means of guiding future activities. These works are to be read, not just by adults, but by the children as well. To be read

means children discuss their designs and share their perspectives. This dialogue often leads to disagreements regarding one another's interpretations, moving the children into the second phase of negotiated learning, discourse.

Discourse is not just talking, but rather a reflective study in the quest for understanding each other's works. This process is an analysis of communication in search of growth and understanding. During the discourse phase, designs are collectively studied to provide the foundation to move forward in the learning process.

The third phase of negotiated learning is documentation. Documentation is observation and extensive record keeping of what is seen or heard by any of the teachers working with the children. It is a fundamental facet of the Reggio Emilia approach. It focuses on capturing the children's memories, thoughts, feelings, or experiences throughout the course of their work. Documentation involves the pedagogy of listening. Teachers listen attentively to the children's dialogue and make accurate records of what transpired. This information is used during planning sessions, those with the children and those with colleagues. Typical documentation will include samples of the student's work, transcriptions of children's dialogue, comments by parents, and photographs of the work in progress. This documentation serves to provide an idea on how the children plan, carry out, and complete a project.

Documentation is often used as a means of re-visiting a topic, sometimes more than once, in an effort to achieve understanding and clarity. Throughout this process, children reflect on their own works as well as others, learning from each other along the way. This re-exploration will often lead to further questions and pave the way for future activities. This process of preparing, displaying, and examining documents demonstrates how learning by the Reggio approach permits revision of works and ideas in the quest for knowledge and is considered a spiral, not an

orderly, linear process. Documentation also shows the students that their work has value and is taken seriously. Reggio teachers believe that if children believe their work is valued, they will take more interest and care in what they are doing.

Documentation also provides parents with the opportunity to understand what and how their children are learning. As they learn about the children's work, they are welcome to make reflections or comments as well as contribute ideas that could enhance the educational process. An example provided by Gandini was the creation, by both parents and teachers, of a structure lined with mirrors that provided the children the opportunity to interact and play with their images. Another example included suggestions for field experiences that would compliment a topic under investigation by the children.

Pedagogista. In Reggio Emilia, educators believe “the highest level of teaching is best achieved through real work experience, supported by continuous reflection and professional development” (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 130). As noted by Tiziana Filippini, a pedagogista, “the pedagogista works to promote within each self and among teachers an attitude of ‘learning to learn’ (as John Dewey called it), an openness to change, and a willingness to discuss opposing points of view” (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 130).

The pedagogista's roles include in service training for teachers, identification and development of new areas and experiences for professional development, and the facilitation of dialogue and reflection regarding educational issues. Knowing that a successful educational program is dependent upon strong teacher-parent relationships, the pedagogista also provides support to teachers in their daily relationships with individual families.

Since the pedagoga works with several schools within the city, knowledge gained through interactions with the teachers is also shared between educators at the various schools. This action builds on the Reggio Emilia philosophy of teacher as researcher and collaborator.

Planning and teaching. Reggio Emilia educators follow an emergent curriculum. They believe in flexible planning, or, as they call it, *progettazione*. Reggio teachers view children as strong, capable, unique individuals with much to offer in their own learning; therefore, children are involved in the daily examination and discussion of their works, assisting in the planning for the next activity. Teachers also meet after school and collectively review, reflect upon, and research the children's forms of communication and their own documentation. The children's challenges, curiosities, and interests are shared. Suggestions are offered for possible activities and ways to extend the children's thinking while supporting their interests and needs.

A key aspect of this approach is that no plan is fixed. Throughout the day, teachers keep an open mind and permit the children's questions, comments, and discoveries to guide the direction the lesson will take. This makes teaching quite challenging, for the teachers never really know where a lesson will end up and must be prepared to readjust their thinking at any moment.

Malaguzzi admits, "One of their biggest challenges is to be present without being intrusive in order to best sustain cognitive and social dynamics while they are in progress" (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 118). Following *progettazione*, teachers constantly struggle with the dilemma of when to intervene. Although they don't want to interrupt the cognitive process, they don't want to miss a teaching moment either.

Along with the task of finding challenging, satisfying problems that will sustain the children's interest, teachers must be able to recognize cognitive knots. A cognitive knot is a moment of cognitive disequilibrium that stops a child from proceeding in their task. These knots

may be the result of uncertainty, conflicts in thinking, or lack of skill or knowledge to be able to move forward. The teachers are to identify these cognitive knots and raise children's awareness of them as a catapult for future activities.

In regards to intellectual conflict, Reggio teachers understand this to be the driving force of all growth. Therefore, Edwards et al. (1998) state, "teachers seek to bring out, rather than suppress, conflicts of view points between children" (p. 191). In fact, teachers will often stimulate conflict to encourage dialogue and sharing of ideas or perspectives. Conflict acknowledges differences, triggers hypothesis generation, inquiry, and discovery. Reggio teachers recognize it as an essential element in the learning process.

As learners themselves, teachers in Reggio Emilia engage in the process of self-examination and reflection. They understand that honest, extensive reflection is part of the foundation for good teaching. It provokes inquiry and discovery of their own. In addition, teachers attend meetings with colleagues where discussion and critical reflection occur. Educational issues are raised, discussed, and constructive criticism offered. Again, understanding the importance of this process is crucial to good teaching, the teachers are very receptive to this interaction and accepting of this advice.

Projects

Following with their cultural views, many activities in Reggio schools involve collaborative work. Teachers found that interaction between children and the presence of multiple perspectives, stimulates interest, discussion, and conflicts, all necessary elements to begin and sustain projects. Working in group settings, children tend to be more proactive in their learning and take on more responsibility. This environment assists in both social and cognitive

development of the child. As a result of much in class research, the teachers discovered a group of five children to be the most ideal for productive interaction and individual growth.

Within the collaborative setting, children are guided to embark on long-term projects in which many aspects of a topic are investigated, discussed and reinvestigated some more. Since the children's interest guides the project, no time frame is set. As long as interest is there and new questions for discovery arise, the project moves forward. Projects are a form of spiral learning where children are encouraged to reexplore previous activities and discoveries and build upon their newly found knowledge in the pursuit of understanding. Revision of their works and ideas are welcome.

For clearer understanding, a brief look at a long-term project follows. The project was initiated when the children went out to play after a rainstorm and discovered their reflections in a mud puddle. An exploration of the size, shape, and color of the reflection took place. The children also made comments about the changes in the water as they stepped into their reflections. A teacher, building on the children's interests, places a large mirror on the ground for further investigation of reflections. This activity triggers the discovery of other reflections besides the children's. Throughout this process, the teachers are listening intently to the children's comments and questions, observing their actions and emotions, and documenting all of it. This information is used to prepare a follow-up activity in the classroom with paper cutouts and small mirrors. The children continue their exploration of reflections and compare and contrast their findings during this new activity with their first day's experience. The study continues with drawings of reflections and the use of light to create shadows in an effort to help the children understand what a shadow is not. Throughout the study, children use many forms of communication to symbolize their knowledge and understanding or lack there of. The study

moves forward through several other activities, with design, discourse, and documentation guiding its path. The teachers documentation is crucial to both their understanding of the children's learning as well as providing information necessary for children to revisit their experiences and discoveries, serving as a launching point for further inquiry.

This project approach to learning acknowledges the value placed on the contributions children make to the development of their own knowledge and reflects the Reggio belief that knowledge is constructed with others. It also demonstrates that shared meaning is created as children engage in activities collectively.

Throughout this process of using data to inform teaching, a teacher's previous ways of understanding and believing are often challenged and new perspectives and knowledge are created. As a co-constructor of knowledge, the teacher becomes a learner, researcher, and collaborator, characteristics desired of any good teacher.

Critique

In the exploration of the Reggio Emilia approach, there are several factors that present as unique to this system of education. The first is the way their cultural heritage is integrated into their philosophy of pedagogy. Being a collectivist society, education is considered a shared responsibility between the community, parents, and teachers. All individuals are treated as partners in the educational process. This is reflected in the organizational structure of the school system, which includes both educators and non-educators in administrative and decision-making positions. A portion of the city's revenues is also given in support of early childhood education. In addition, every citizen's input is valued and people are encouraged to become involved with the schools. Community and parental input is embraced and used in curriculum planning.

A second factor that makes the Reggio Emilia approach unique is the view that children are capable, responsible citizens of their town. This attitude extends to the classroom where teachers see children as protagonists in their education. They value the children's input and welcome them as active participants in the co-construction of knowledge.

The idea of *pzogettezione* also sets the Reggio approach apart from other educational methods. There are no set standards or objectives a teacher must meet. Set time frames for projects are nonexistent and there are no tests. Since learning is considered a spiral process, teachers encourage and welcome the return to previous experiences for further exploration. Teachers have the freedom of flexibility and may allow children to continue with a topic until the children feel cognitively satisfied. Children are not forced to move on for the sake of meeting set standards or objectives.

The extension of the classroom into town is another unique facet of the Reggio Approach. Early in the program's development, teachers purposefully conducted class in town as a means of gaining acceptance by the community for their schools and to win their support. Their plan worked. Today these excursions into town still occur. These field experiences are an integral part of the curriculum and provide opportunity for exploration, questions, and dialogue. These are not just fun days out of the classroom, but meaningful learning experiences that will be brought back to the classroom for further development. It is a very powerful mode of learning and adds to the strength of the research approach to education.

Another unique aspect is the extended in-depth investigations or projects. Unlike most projects in schools, these have no designated end result and are not time constrained. This opens up many more opportunities for hypothesis generation and revision, permitting the investigation

of a topic from multiple aspects. Therefore, a much deeper and complete understanding of a concept or topic is achieved.

A key element to the Reggio approach that sets it apart from others is the use of visual or graphic languages as a form of communication for children. Children's forms of expression are typically stifled in the classroom setting. They are often restricted by either the lack of resources or the lack of acknowledgement by teachers that there are other acceptable and valuable forms of communication. In Reggio, children are more comfortable and willing to express their understanding or questions because they may choose a mode of communication that they prefer or that they feel symbolizes what they want to say. It truly gives children a voice in which to communicate.

Finally, the role of teacher-as-researcher distinguishes the Reggio philosophy of pedagogy from other educational approaches. No other educational system involves teachers in such an intense daily effort to observe and record the learning process. It is the heart of the Reggio approach and reflects their belief of how learning is constructed. Teachers are provided training in listening, observation, and documentation skills. These educators have a profound understanding of the critical role documentation plays in the research process.

The teachers are true co-constructors of knowledge within the classroom. Through their listening, observation, and documentation, teachers are provided with insights to children's learning unmatched by any other method. These insights are the foundation for planning and guide daily activities. They also challenge teachers' prior knowledge and understanding, contributing to the teacher's cognitive growth.

The persistence in which the teacher-as-researcher project has been implemented, speaks for its endurance. The study, fraught with its own cognitive knots, has held together due to the

collaborative, unified approach and the dedication of those involved in the pursuit of an educational method that best assists children in their cognitive, social, moral, and emotional development.

Reciprocity is also an important element in the study's sustenance. Reggio citizens strongly believe that sound interrelationships are key to the success of any endeavor. Great effort is taken by Reggio educators to keep the lines of communication open. This is evident through the school atmosphere, the role of the pedagogista, the strong parent-teacher relationships, and the organizational structure. All of these factors demonstrate the value of open communication and the exchange of ideas.

This aspect of the Reggio approach could be incorporated into the American educational system and to some degree already is through school councils, that have both educators and non-educators included, parent-teacher organizations, and parent-teacher conferences. To attain the same success as the Reggio community, what needs to change or be modified is the attitude toward the desired result of the interaction. Teachers need to be more on the receiving end of knowledge rather than only providers.

The Reggio schools physical design is also much different. Schools are constructed in a manner that promotes a community atmosphere by arranging all rooms around the piazza. The glass walls, movable walls, and amount of light also provide a positive, warm, and inviting environment conducive to learning. These attributes are conceivable in U.S. schools; however, much time and money would be necessary for this to occur. Two opportunities for these improvements would be during building restoration and new construction.

Another distinguishing factor is the use of controlled conflict by Reggio teachers in the classroom setting. It is used as a means of promoting dialogue and inquiry. This could easily be

implemented into any classroom as long as all those involved, including parents, are informed of its purpose. Teachers also need to be willing to be trained in this technique and make the effort to incorporate outcomes into lessons when appropriate.

As with all schools, Reggio staff struggles with finding resources, financial concerns, difficult relationships, maintaining community support and meeting the needs of parents and students. No system is stagnant; therefore, new challenges constantly arise, sometimes daily. On a positive note, all teachers share in the excitement of the children, the creation of new relationships, and the joy of new discoveries about and with children. Children in early childhood centers all over the world also deal with shared concerns. They struggle with developing a sense of self-identity, creating trusting relationships, and with the daily separation from their parents. Children also share in joys such as the discovery of new information, meeting new people, creating meaningful works, and realizing their talents.

In conclusion, Reggio educators have created a powerful approach to the early education of children. By seeing themselves as learners as well as teachers, they opened their minds to alternative ways of discovering knowledge and understanding. They have also created an environment where taking risks is enjoyed and not feared. Through research and reflection both teachers and children are moved forward in their educational journey. The Reggio Emilia approach is one all educators should study in an effort to improve and advance pedagogy.

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