

# Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy, is widely known for its approach to educating young children (Hendrick, 1997). Founded by Loris Malaguzzi (1920–1994), Reggio Emilia sponsors programs for children from three months to six years of age. Certain essential beliefs and practices underlie the Reggio Emilia approach. These basic features define the Reggio approach, make it a constructivist program, and enable it to be adapted and implemented in many U.S. early childhood programs.

## Beliefs About Children and How They Learn

### Relationships

The Reggio approach focuses on each child and is conducted in relation to the family, other children, the teachers, the environment of the school, the community, and the wider society. Each school is viewed as a system in which all these interconnected relationships are reciprocal, activated, and supported. In other words, as Vygotsky believed, children learn through social interactions. In addition, as Montessori indicated, the environment supports and is important to learning.

When preparing space, teachers offer the possibility for children to be with the teachers and many of the other children, or with just a few of them. Also, children can be alone when they need a little niche to stay by themselves.

Teachers are always aware, however, that children learn a great deal in exchanges with their peers, especially when they interact in small groups. Such small groups of two, three, four, or five children provide possibilities for paying attention, listening to each other, developing curiosity and interest, asking questions, and responding. Also, groups provide opportunities for negotiation and ongoing dynamic communication.

### Hundred Languages

Malaguzzi wrote a poem about the many languages of children. Here is the way it begins:

*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.*

The hundred languages Malaguzzi was referring to include drawing, building, modeling, sculpturing, discussing, inventing, discovering, and more. Teachers are encouraged to create environments in which children can use all hundred languages to learn.

### Time

Reggio Emilia teachers believe time is not set by a clock and that continuity is not interrupted by the calendar. Children's own sense of time and their personal rhythms are considered in planning and carrying out activities and projects. The full-day schedule provides sufficient time for being together among peers in an environment that is conducive to getting things done with satisfaction.

Teachers get to know the personal rhythms and learning styles of each child. This is possible in part because children stay with the same teachers and the same peer group for three-year cycles (infancy to three years and three years to six years).

### Adults' Roles

Adults play a very powerful role in children's lives; children's well-being is connected to the well-being of

parents and teachers.

## **The Teacher**

Teachers observe and listen closely to children to know how to plan or proceed with their work. They ask questions and discover children's ideas, hypotheses, and theories. They collaboratively discuss what they have observed and recorded, and they make flexible plans and preparations. Teachers then enter into dialogues with the children and offer them occasions for discovering and also revisiting and reflecting on experiences, since they consider learning an ongoing process. Teachers are partners with children in a continual process of research and learning.

## **The Atelierista**

An atelierista, a teacher trained in the visual arts, works closely with teachers and children in every preprimary school and makes visits to the infant/toddler centers.

## **Parents**

Parents are an essential component of the program and are included in the advisory committee that runs each school. Parents' participation is expected and supported and takes many forms: day-to-day interaction, work in the schools, discussion of educational and psychological issues, special events, excursions, and celebrations.

## **The Environment**

The infant/toddler centers and school programs are the most visible aspect of the work done by teachers and parents in Reggio Emilia. They convey many messages, of which the most immediate is that this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and the instructive power of space.

## **The Physical Space**

The layout of physical space, in addition to welcoming whoever enters, fosters encounters, communication, and relationships. The arrangement of structures, objects, and activities encourages choices, problem solving, and discoveries in the process of learning.

The centers and schools of Reggio Emilia are beautiful. Their beauty comes from the message the whole school conveys about children and teachers engaged together in the pleasure of learning. There is attention to detail everywhere: in the color of the walls, the shape of the furniture, the arrangement of simple objects on shelves and tables. Light from the windows and doors shines through transparent collages and weavings made by children. Healthy green plants are everywhere. Behind the shelves displaying shells or other found or made objects are mirrors that reflect the patterns that children and teachers have created.

The environment is also highly personal. For example, a series of small boxes made of white cardboard creates a grid on the wall of a school. On each box the name of a child or a teacher is printed with rubber-stamp letters. These boxes are used for leaving little surprises or messages for one another. Communication is valued and favored at all levels.

The space in the centers and schools of Reggio Emilia is personal in still another way: it is full of children's own work. Everywhere there are paintings, drawings, paper sculptures, wire constructions, transparent collages coloring the light, and mobiles moving gently overhead. Such things turn up even in unexpected spaces like stairways and bathrooms. Although the work of the children is pleasing to the eye, it is not intended as decoration, but rather to show and document the competence of children, the beauty of their ideas, and the complexity of their learning processes.

## **The Atelier**

A special workshop or studio, called an atelier, is set aside and used by all the children and teachers in the school. It contains a great variety of tools and resource materials, along with records of past projects

and experiences.

The activities and projects, however, do not take place only in the atelier. Smaller spaces called miniateliers are set up in each classroom. In fact, each classroom becomes an active workshop with children involved with a variety of materials and experiences that they have discussed and chosen with teachers and peers. In the view of Reggio educators, the children's use of many media is not art or a separate part of the curriculum but an inseparable, integral part of the whole cognitive/symbolic expression involved in the process of learning.

## **Program Practices**

Cooperation is the powerful mode of working that makes possible the achievement of the goals Reggio educators set for themselves. Teachers work in pairs in each classroom. They see themselves as researchers gathering information about their work with children by means of continual documentation. The strong collegial relationships that are maintained with teachers and staff enable them to engage in collaborative discussion and interpretation of both teachers' and children's work.

## **Documentation**

Transcriptions of children's remarks and discussions, photographs of their activity, and representations of their thinking and learning using many media are carefully arranged by the atelierista, along with the other teachers, to document the work and the process of learning. Documentation has many functions:

- Making parents aware of children's experiences and maintaining their involvement
- Allowing teachers to understand children better and to evaluate their own work, thus promoting professional growth
- Facilitating communication and exchange of ideas among educators
- Making children aware that their effort is valued
- Creating an archive that traces the history of the school and the pleasure of learning by many children and their teachers

## **Curriculum and Practices**

The curriculum is not established in advance. Teachers express general goals and make hypotheses about what direction activities and projects might take. On this basis, they make appropriate preparations. Then, after observing children in action, teachers compare, discuss, and interpret together their observations and make choices that they share with the children about what to offer and how to sustain the children in their exploration and learning. In fact, the curriculum emerges in the process of each activity or project and is flexibly adjusted accordingly through this continuous dialogue among teachers and with children.

Projects provide the backbone of the children's and teachers' learning experiences. These projects are based on the strong conviction that learning by doing is of great importance and that to discuss in groups and to revisit ideas and experiences is the premier way of gaining better understanding and learning.

Ideas for projects originate in the experiences of children and teachers as they construct knowledge together. Projects can last from a few days to several months. They may start from a chance event, an idea, or a problem posed by one or more children or from an experience initiated directly by teachers.

The Project Approach, which is so popular in early childhood education today, can trace its roots partially to Reggio Emilia practice. With the Project Approach, an investigation is undertaken by a small group of children within a class, sometimes by a whole class, and occasionally by an individual child. The key feature of a project is that it is a search for answers to questions about a topic worth learning more about, something the children are interested in (Helm & Katz, 2001).

## **Providing for Diversity and Disability**

Like the Montessori approach, Reggio places a high value on respect for each child. In a Reggio program everyone has rights—children, teachers, and parents. Children with disabilities have special rights and

are routinely included in programs for all children.

The Grant Early Childhood Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is addressing the challenge of inclusion through Prizing Our National Differences (POND), a program based on the Reggio Emilia approach. The POND program includes all children with disabilities as full participants in general education classrooms with their age-appropriate peers. Four core ingredients of the Reggio approach facilitate successful inclusion at Grant Early Childhood Center:

- Encouraging collaborative relationships
- Constructing effective environments
- Developing project-based curriculums
- Documenting learning in multiple ways (Edmiaston & Fitzgerald, 2000)

## **Further Thoughts**

There are a number of things to keep in mind when considering the Reggio Emilia approach. First, its theoretical base rests within constructivism and shares ideas compatible with those of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Dewey. Second, there is no set curriculum. Rather, the curriculum emerges or springs from children's interests and experiences. This approach is, for many, difficult to implement and does not ensure that children will learn basic academic skills valued by contemporary American society. Third, the Reggio Emilia approach is suited to a particular culture and society. How this approach works and flourishes and meets the educational needs of children in an Italian village may not necessarily be appropriate for meeting the needs of contemporary American children.

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