

Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education (often referred to as Reggio-inspired practice) is based on the philosophies and practices of the infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Approximately thirty-three schools, serving infants to children six years old, comprise the municipal early childhood program in Reggio Emilia. The integration of theory and knowledge from disciplines such as science, art, literature, and architecture are central to the continuous reflective practice of the Reggio educators. In 1991, *Newsweek* named these schools the most outstanding early childhood centers in the world. Since that time, the schools have received international attention for their understandings of the pedagogy, psychology, and sociology of early childhood education. The first international exhibit created by the Reggio educators, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, traveled across many continents for almost ten years as a source of information and inspiration; the current exhibit entitled *The Wonder of Learning* is currently traveling among cities in the United States. The exhibits are pedagogical documentation making visible the learning of the child, the teacher, the families, and the community.

History

After World War II, Italian citizens were faced with the magnitude of their newfound liberation from the Fascist regime. Though the country had been decimated by war, the Italians' determination prevailed. In Villa Cella, for instance, men, women, and children reclaimed bricks from rubble left by Allied planes to begin the work of building a school to educate their youngest citizens. Upon hearing the news that the citizens just outside Reggio Emilia were taking on such a task, Loris Malaguzzi—now referred to as the father of the Reggio Emilia approach—immediately rode his bike to the site of the building project. What he found was a place where land had been donated, machinery had been borrowed, citizens were volunteering labor, and even children were engaged in the building of the new school.

Inspired by this incredible act of solidarity, Malaguzzi continued a lifelong quest to ensure that all children had access to the types of education that would allow them to reach their destinies. Because of his efforts and the continued efforts of expert practitioners and researchers—Carlina Rinaldi, Amelia Gambetti, Lella Gandini, Veia Vecchi, and a host of others—the infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia, Italy continue to gain international attention for their expertise in educational pedagogy and research.

Essential Questions and Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach

While only the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy can really be called “Reggio schools”, the essential questions and fundamentals of their practice provide a framework to inspire and promote best practices for schools anywhere. Carlina Rinaldi, executive consultant for Reggio Children, has written and lectured on the following fundamental questions that are continuously examined through critical reflection in the Reggio Schools: 1) Who is the child?; 2) What is childhood at this moment in our society?; 3) What is the meaning of “to educate”?; 4) What is the relationship between teaching and learning? Which is the consequence of the other?; 5) What is the relationship of theory and practice? 6) What is the role of school in society?; and 7) What is the relationship between school and life?

In addition to the continuous re-examination of the essential questions, the fundamentals of Reggio Emilia provide a solid foundation based upon theory and research. The school is viewed as a democratic place where the voices of all participants are valued and shaped by the experiences. Parents are active participants in the school and contribute valuable ideas, skills, and resources. The “image of the child” is the belief that all children are capable, competent, powerful learners who bring to the school valuable theories and hypotheses of their own that are worthy of investigation. Learning is not linear and therefore not predictable. Teachers are keen observers of children and great importance is placed upon the adult being an active listener. The adults speak most often with questions to challenge and nurture the child’s thinking and provide provocation for new ideas and theories to emerge. Carlina Rinaldi describes the relationship between listening and change; children come with their own theories and interpretations and as adults we must listen and be open to their ideas and change our questions, plans, and ideas in response to the child. The importance of relationships between and among children and adults, materials, and ideas in intentionally designed environments provoke inquiry and expression through multiple languages (drawing, sculpting, movement, music, etc.). The concept of “the environment as the third teacher” reflects the purposeful selection and organization of space and materials in a way that engages the child in purposeful learning and exploration. The construction of knowledge is a group process and children engage in interactions that encourage them to share and re-interpret their understandings. The investigations and project work of the children is captured through images, artifacts, dialogue of the children, and critical analysis and interpretations of the educators in documentation that makes the learning visible for the community and provides a permanent capture of the process of learning that can be re-examined and researched to continuously inform the practice of teaching.

The Reggio Emilia Approach in an International Context

Over the past two decades, the Reggio Emilia approach has spread internationally. In the 1990s, Dr. Louise Cadwell led the charge in bringing Reggio-inspired practice to the United States. This work began when the Danforth Foundation provided funding for Webster University to partner with Dr. Cadwell in order to begin the St. Louis Reggio Collaborative which included schools such as The College School, St. Michael’s, and the Clayton Family Center.

While the Reggio Emilia approach is typically associated with early childhood education, it is very much in line with the ideas, theories, and philosophies of university teacher education programs. Educators in Reggio Emilia are informed by their own work and research but are also quite familiar with the work of educational scholars such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Gardner, and Dewey (to name only a few). Because of this, teacher educators—especially those teaching early childhood and elementary courses—find affinity with the work of the Italians. Some educators use the Essential Questions to guide their thinking about their teacher education practices. In other cases, universities are opening their own schools or partnering with local school districts to create early childhood centers and/or elementary schools based on the philosophies and practices of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. For instance, Butler University and the Indianapolis Public Schools have partnered to open the IPS/Butler University Laboratory School in Indianapolis, Indiana. Regardless of their application to early

childhood education or university level instruction, the Essential Questions and the Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia approach provide guidance for educators interested in engaging in Reggio-inspired practice.

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See Also: Early Childhood

Further Readings

- Cadwell, L. *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home: An Innovative Approach to Early Childhood Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G., eds. *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach—Advanced Reflections* (2nd ed.). Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 1998.
- Malaguzzi, L. “Your Image of Child: Where Teaching Begins.” *Child Care Information Exchange*, v.96/3, 67-70 (1994).