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A description and critique of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

EDT 660-Introduction to Educational Research

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Reggio Emilia Approach

Dramatic forces of change have altered the culture of Italy since its unification in 1870. As a culture changes, its institutions, if they are to continue to serve those who created them, must inevitably change too. Consolidation, war, fascism, poverty, and more war, combined with the breakdown of the national government, realignment with the Church, new interpersonal relationships, and new work relationships forced into question fundamental assumptions of the function, relationships, and effectiveness of the “old order” institutions. Educational institutions, devastated by World War II, were being reborn. Not only reborn, but in the Northern Regions of Italy, where a long history of child activism prevailed, rethought.

Children—especially vulnerable to the effects of war and social disorder—grow and flourish in a stable environment. A peaceful society must be able to educate their children to avoid repeating the mistakes of their ancestors. An educational institutional framework to achieve these goals would have to be flexible enough to adapt to constant change and function without specifics on how best to educate and nurture children. One framework, created nearly 40 years ago, attempts this. It is in operation in the northern region of Italy near the city of Reggio Emilia. The purpose of this study is to explore the Reggio Emilia Early Childhood Center experiment and describe the ongoing collaboration between children, educators, parents, and the community as they constantly collect data, question, analyze, and reflect upon how to best support and nurture young children’s developmental needs.

Philosophical Underpinnings

The best way to view the Reggio Emilia approach is by analysis of the tenets of their philosophy and their inextricably woven interdependencies. There are four cardinal

beliefs that all interact and guide every facet of the Reggio experience, namely, (a) an intense belief in the *power and present citizenship of children*; (b) a humble admission that all is not known about teaching and learning and that the teacher must, therefore, be a *constant researcher*; (c) an understanding that the *space of education* is vitally important and worthy of great considerations; and finally, (d) that a system of *interrelated relationships* must exist between the community, families, teachers, and children.

Power and present citizenship of children.

Mussolini and the fascists held that the government was more important than the individual was. As fascism failed, the founders of the Reggio Emilia approach looked to the other extreme of importance—that of the individual, more specifically, the child. They saw the impact of war on children and the child's innate resilience. They recognized that children are not just a collection of needy individuals but rather were part of the ever-changing fabric of their community and capable of incredible growth and learning even under extreme and horrible circumstances. Thus was born the notion that children are *present citizens*. As citizens, they deserve to be treated with rights accorded to all citizens.

How then, would one create a system to acknowledge and take advantage of the strengths of the child while at the same time ensuring what ever system that was created could adapt and grow as children's needs changed? First, the deep belief that the child is capable and strong implies that they, themselves, can and should take a role in their own education. They become *protagonists* in their own learning (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1998). At one time, they are both the most important leading player and a supporting character in their development. By focusing on small groups and problem solving—with

the resulting intellectual conflict, called “*the engine of all growth*” (Edwards et al., p. 191), the educators spur growth and development. The educators intentionally create situations to push children into *cognitive knots* or sticking points (Edwards et al.). Those moments create *disturbances* to enhance conflict (New, 1998) and force children co-construct and negotiate solutions among themselves. In fact, the teachers constantly force themselves not to introduce adult solutions based on the firm belief in proximal development. Vygotsky’s *zone of proximal development* (as cited in Forman & Fyfe, 1998) is the difference between what a child can do with help and without adult guidance. A strong belief in the strength of children forces the belief that the zone of proximal development is very large.

The curriculum Reggio Emilia creates is called *progettazione*. It creation acknowledges and reinforces the power of children and the power of social interactions. It is an *emergent curriculum* not mandated from administrative or standards setting bodies. This means it is not scripted; rather, it is drawn and changes with the needs and observations of the children, families, teachers, and community. It employs real life situations and long-term projects to enhance interaction—and therefore—learning opportunities. Mundane tasks such as setting a lunch table or cleaning up afterward are included in the overall learning experience. The long-term projects are guaranteed to be of interest to the children because it was the children themselves who expressed, either verbally or non-verbally, a desire to explore the topics. Educators may introduce challenging problems to further intellectual explorations. This is called *provoking occasions of discovery* (Edwards et al., p. 182).

These ideas and general directions are also informal and subject to change. They aid in creating a developmentally appropriate practice by taking ideas from children and not prescribing them from a desire to achieve a particular competency or skill (New, 1998). The teachers are constantly listening and observing the children's actions and interactions to guide the development of the *progettazione*. By selecting topics the children have proposed they further and noticeably reinforce the message that what children think is not only important but of true value.

Two important warnings are associated with the value of the child and the *progettazione*. First, the idea of the strength of the child is even apparent in the role of adult workers assigned to help with special needs children. They warn of *body guard staffing*. They feel it is easy to over assist a child and create an unhealthy two-way dependency between the child and adult (Smith, 1998). Second, the *progettazione*—a living and ever changing entity—must not be subtly manipulated by the teachers to achieve an end. The fact that a changing and sometimes not fully known curriculum is more difficult to manage is acknowledged and recommended as it is both more exciting (Edwards et al., 1998) and fits the belief that “things for and about children are only learned from children” (Edwards et al., p. 51).

Finally, Malaguzzi admits mistakes are made operating within the concept of proximal development and emergent *progettazione* (Malaguzzi, 1999). The Reggio system must share the view of Dee Hock, the founder and CEO emeritus of VISA, regarding failure. According to Hock (1999, p. 47), “Failure is not to be feared. It is from failure that most growth comes; provided that one can recognize it, admit it, learn

from it, rise above it, and try again.” To recognize, admit, learn, and rise above mistakes, the Reggio system employs a powerful tool of constant research.

Teacher as researcher

In order for the progettazione to continuously adjust itself and adapt to the children, parents, and community, the teachers must adopt the concept of *teacher as researcher*. The philosophical underpinning of teacher as researcher is humility; an admission that even with the best theories and practices no “best” educational solution is possible since the time, people, and culture are ever changing. As a teacher and researcher they must “shift focus back and forth between what they know and what they are learning about children as groups and individuals, and what they can gather from families and the larger community that is of relevance to their educational pursuits” (New, 1998, p. 275). As such, several systems developed to aid the teacher in this research ranging from using non-verbal supplementary expression mediums, listening, documenting, employing additional educators, and critiquing.

Non-verbal supplementary expression mediums.

Verbal language is a primary means of communications between adults but is not in children. Children, especially the very young and non-verbally proficient, are able to represent their thoughts, fears, and interactions with others on a *metalinguistic* level. They express themselves using facial or body movements. Additionally, they are capable of manipulating a variety of materials to tell a story. In the Reggio system, the teachers speak of *reading* pictures. These non-verbal media transmit valuable information regarding how *knowledge is constructed by the learner*. To enhance these non-verbal communication opportunities special space and materials, discussed later in greater detail,

are regularly used. The real product of this expression is more than the resulting drawing or sculpture; rather, it is the process and learning the children undertook to achieve their end product. Thus, it is unlikely to see a “cookie cutter” art project displayed as in the U.S. where an entire class would duplicate the teacher’s hand outline drawn turkey. Reggio children, driven by their imagination, create individualized projects and art to be studied by the Reggio educators. To adequately study processes one must listen and document.

Listening.

If the teacher truly believes the child’s thoughts, ideas, and expressions are important than they must be listened to. The practice of listening must be real and not merely a break to insert platitudes. Real listening suggests an honest reciprocity between teacher and learner (New, 1998). In Reggio, it is common to hear the expression “catching the ball that the children throw us”(Edwards, 1998). This phrase means the child’s verbal and non-verbal expressions, much like a ball in a game, can be missed or dropped without adequate attention. Knowing when to intervene, then, becomes a critical decision. One that is debated at length as part of ongoing research and professional development. A key tool to develop better listening is documentation. In fact, according to Tiziana Filippini (1990), “listening is at the heart of the teacher’s role”.

Documentation.

Observing, or recording, or displaying some product of a child’s action is not documentation. Rather, the recording of the process of questioning, development, and creation of a child’s product juxtaposed with a record of the teacher’s internal thoughts and questions becomes true documentation. The documentation methods range from

audio recordings, video recordings, photographs, transcriptions of children's conversations, and other media including the work the children complete. It is extensive and deep (Katz, 1998).

This source of information serves a variety of purposes. First, each teacher has the opportunity to reflect on this documented information. As part of the teacher's ongoing training, time is allowed for this review. This reflection combines their knowledge of teaching theory, other research, and their intimate knowledge of the children involved. This allows ongoing qualitative recording and analysis to drive practice. It can be shared with others. Therein is another application of documentation: Just as children learn and construct thoughts with others, the teachers, sharing this research, interact with their peers and those interactions form a greater understanding of what was documented. Each classroom has two teachers called co-educators to foster regular peer-to-peer interactions. On a more broad scale, additional constituents are invited to study the documentation.

By making and taking the time to reflect and comment on the thoughts and ideas expressed by children the teaching staff, parents, and community have an opportunity to combine theories of education, their experiences with children, and their thoughts regarding what can be learned. Also, by not focusing their research on assessment of particular skills attainment--that could lead to labeling and attention to individual deficits--the study is kept forward thinking to best suit the needs of the particular children.

Additional educators – Pedagogistas Atelieristas Parents.

Of special note are Pedagogistas, Atelieristas [Italian plural is pegagogisti and atelieristi], and parents. Although a Pedagogistas server several schools and are

responsible for administrative tasks such as scheduling, staffing, shifts, etc...(Filippini, 1998), they also provide a link between the schools they serve. They add consistency and coherence and reinforce the theme of social constructivism. As they are included in the review of documentation, they bring forward their knowledge, experience, and other school's practices to create an ongoing in-service training while exploring and enhancing the progettazione. Just as alliances between learner and teacher are built, the pedagogistas also seek to build alliances between the co-educators, staff, politicians, and community.

Alelieristas, on the other hand, assist the teachers in reading and reflecting critically on the documentation. They provide insights and instruction on the best forms of non-verbal media to explore the thoughts of children. Especially through artistic expression and their knowledge of its applicability to young children's expression, they create additional avenues for learning about children. Since they circulate through several schools and classrooms, they, too, provide knowledge gleaned from other schools and teachers.

Parents benefit greatly from reviewing fully documented product rather than simply looking at a pretty picture. They see and read much more about the complex nature of learning and grow to understand how their child thinks as they produce various expressive items. Parents and teachers both reward children by viewing the children's art not as decorative products (Katz, 1998) but for mastering the skills required to think and create.

The all-important review of the documentation includes criticism and open discussion of the thoughts and actions, especially of the co-educators, as projects unfold.

Criticism.

In Reggio Emilia, where the teacher is considered a learner, much of the learning comes from deep exploration of the theories, research, and practices of the teacher. This exploration can be in the form of group *criticism*. This criticism is not an attack of the presenter, but rather, a critique and review of the rational of the observed interactions. Even cooks and staff can be involved in various reviews. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder and long time leader of Reggio, called this open review method a *circle of ideas* (Edwards et al., 1998). Completely in harmony with the idea that children learn through interactions, so too, do Reggio Emilia educators learn among their interactions and consciously allow time for this exchange of idea. The goal of their criticism is not solving a particular issue but “to think critically about difficult questions” (Edwards et al., p. 190). Professional growth stems from the reflection on those new questions and the application of acquired knowledge in the resulting praxis.

Space of education is vitally important.

Criticism is also applied to an inanimate part of the Reggio Emilia experience, namely, the space itself. Space is so important that it is sometimes called *the third educator* (Gandini, 1998). Since the focus of the Reggio Emilia’s practice is on children and their interactions, construction and use of the space maximizes and intensifies those interactions. And, just as the curriculum is ever adapting, so too does the use and design of the space change. They consider the space as a *ship in motion*; not a fixed and unchangeable landmark.

Since one of the hallmarks of the Reggio approach is the interconnectedness of community, home, and school, it is no wonder their buildings designs mimic, on a small scale, those structures.

The *piazza*, or main square of a town, is replicated as the central space of the school. It supports and intensifies (Malaguzzi, 1998) the social interactions of children, families, and educators. The walls serve as exhibition spaces for the children's creations and the documentation describing the reflections and evolution of the work. Parents (and the community at large) can easily see the depth of thought and care that went into their children's projects. The children see their work's importance and see it as worthy of great adult inspection, reflection, and retrospection. The openness of the piazza, along with transparent walls and many windows, allows light to permeate the school. Light tables supplement natural light. The light allows children to explore the wonders of shading, transparency, and heightens exposure of objects. An exposure similar to that caused by positioning the schools near the population centers rather than isolating them from society as a whole. The transparent walls allow the educators to observe more children and the children to see their peers and siblings reducing separation feelings in the youngest children (Gandini, 1998). Even the photographs of the entire staff—reinforcing the notion of equality among educators—and child's eye level self-portraits and mirrors reduce anxiety and promote interconnectivity.

Additional areas, called *ateliers* and *mini-ateliers*, supplement the classrooms. These connected spaces are mini studios or labs. Non-verbal thoughts are expressed as children create projects using a wide range of materials. According to Gandini, the space is "...aesthetically and intellectually stimulating...they convey respect for interests, rights, needs, and capacities of those that use the space" (as cited in Edwards, 1999). The open spaces connecting all the areas promote maximum movement (Malaguzzi, 1998) and interdependence and interactions among all the children and educators. The openness

and use of homelike materials (Gandini, 1998) reminds one of the freedoms of home and the interconnectedness of extended families. The scale of the school is intentionally small to match the comfort and openness of a family's home.

Openness is further enhanced by not limiting education to the confines of the property lines of the school. Regular visits to places of business, the city itself, and surrounding open areas are seen as just as important *containers* to “favor social interaction, exploration, and learning” (Gandini, 1998, p. 164).

Interrelated relationships must exist between the community, families, teachers, and children

As the physical dimensions of the school building are not seen as constraints, neither are the co-educators, *atelieristas*, and *pedagogistas* seen as the only players in the intellectual and social growth of the children. An entire system of interrelated relationships exists among the children, families, staff, and community. The relationships are bound to the culture of the Italian society and to each individual child's own reality.

One way of strengthening the connection between the child and co-educator is to keep them together for three years rather than a single year. The piazza enhances interpersonal interactions and strengthens educator-parent bonds. The use of parental advisory committees sends a strong message to welcome parents as partners in their children's education. The teachers and parents are also social activists and engage in political discourse and debate. The entire community funds the schools and allows them to play an integrated role in the community. The shared culture of the children, families, educators, and community all bind every action of Reggio system. The Reggio approach,

for 40 years, experimented with these intertwined collaborations between all the abovementioned players and adjusted itself as society and culture changed.

Critique

From all available evidence, the educators of Reggio Emilia have consistently used their philosophical underpinnings in over 40 years of practice. Since one of the key elements has been research, they have been able to conduct a forty-year longitudinal study of early education techniques. The study has been used to create practical rules and operations—their praxis—based on their philosophical principals.

In this section, I will review their system considering the following:

1. Use of research methodology.
2. Appropriateness of research question(s).
3. Results and use findings.
4. Implications.

Use of research methodology

“Where is the quantitative data?” That was the first question raised by this class of U.S. educators upon learning about the Reggio Emilia approach. “How effective is it?” “Where are the numbers?”

Without understanding fully the nature of the Reggio approach it was natural for us to ask this. This is how we score our own schools. We, as a culture, have forced the State of Ohio to issue grade cards so we can determine how one school stacks up against another. We even generally concede these measures are biased and flawed but continue to use them. What we did not understand was why the Reggio system is based on qualitative data and why they would consider any other approach as highly inappropriate.

“Teacher as Researcher” has the built-in fundamental assumption that there is not a single correct curriculum or praxis for educating children; rather, it forces continual learning and review. In the thinking of Reggio educators, a standardized test, by its very nature, carries with it an implicit thought contrary to the principles Reggio operates under. Children in the Reggio system are not thought to be standard; therefore, their curriculum cannot be standard. It follows that the measurements of success should not be standard either. Additionally, the extensive collection and analysis of documentation is a primary source of understanding to the Reggio system. This thinking helps them transcend the status quo and creates opportunities to explore ideas of true innovation. To validate their findings and explore those innovative ideas, they use a *circle of ideas*. By this techniques—the sharing of documentation with parents, staff, experts, and the community—they use triangulation to validate their findings.

This leaves the question, “how do the children do after the move on to other schools?” On two levels I can see how the Reggio system would challenge this question. First, their focus is on meeting the children’s immediate needs and they openly state they see children as *present citizens*. That being the case, how would a test of skills or comparison among other children properly address what they are doing in the present? Second, if there were some fundamental deficiencies their qualitative analysis of interactions with parents would have surely raised the issue. In other words, the parents of former students (or parents with younger children still in the Reggio system) would surely have pointed out any failings. Their *progettazione* is emergent and would adapt to the suggestions/demands of parents and other teachers. They might also counter that

perhaps the required skill is perceived and may not be appropriate to teach children if they, themselves, are not ready to learn such a skill.

I contend qualitative research is the appropriate methodology for their research. Do they collect enough information? Absolutely; not only have they collected field observations for 40 years, they have been responsive to changes in data collection technology. Malaguzzi clearly stated they used tape recorders, cameras, video tape, and computers for data collection as the technology became available. The extensive collection of data and the multiple forms of collection are hallmarks of the Reggio system. In my experience, children worldwide crave attention. The documentation effort sends a strong statement that attention to children is warranted. Children in Reggio receive this message. U.S. schoolchildren, wary at first, would easily adapt to the additional attention. Their parents would be much more wary and would require more education on the rationale and use of the data collected. Until the U.S. parents became more comfortable with the concept of *an idealized pair of teacher and child* (Edwards, 1998) the entire concept of an emergent curriculum and children being their own protagonists will remain foreign.

Documentation—the acquisition of qualitative data—is a fundamental practice in their system. From my experience, their documentation far exceeds any other educational system. They expend considerable energy recording data, reflecting, and reviewing their findings. By using tape recordings and videos they have demonstrated the willingness to use new technology to record children and interactions. Adoption of this level of documentation will only be successful if the U.S. makes time and money available.

Appropriateness of research question(s)

Are the questions the Reggio educators asking the correct ones? In my opinion, since they base questions on the principals of their system, they are more likely to be correct ones. Their system has built-in flexibility to question new opportunities as time changes. They do not rely on tradition for pedagogical practices nor for their research activities. Although they have employed a system of co-educators since the inception of their program, they have added atelieristas and pedagogistas as needed. They saw the importance of sharing insights learned from other schools and the value of incorporating specialists to work with children and the co-educators. They worked out a framework for interconnected relationships between teachers, parents, children, and the community. Their socialist and activist activities are in start contrast to those shown in the U.S. Perhaps if educators in the U.S. took a more activist approach the social awareness and political commitment to children and their education would grow.

Unlike the hierarchical institutions we form in the U.S., the Reggio system prides itself in a flatness of organization. The cook's photo is displayed with the co-educators and pedagogistas. Perhaps of more interest, even the children see themselves on the same level of importance as mirrors show their own image along with the school's staff. In yet another example, all the Reggio participants are involved in detailed analysis of how the space and building should be designed. This in stark contrast to the U.S. system where only minimal involvement is requested from teachers regarding the design of new buildings. Although the teachers may suggest incremental improvements, there is no audience for innovative designs among architects, engineers, and school boards as evidenced by thousands of essentially same school buildings. The Italian culture, and its

civil service structure, may make equality and innovation far simpler tasks to achieve than in the United States.

The questions regarding early education are not just asked in annual in-service training sessions but are asked minute-by-minute, day-by-day. Co-educators constantly review questions, actions, and assumptions, often with the assistance of atelieristas and pedagogistas. The latter two groups share insights from other schools and their own backgrounds. By employing these multiple levels of analysis, they have created a system where questions can be reviewed, and more importantly, they have institutionalized a process of asking “what questions are we not asking?” A good example is shown in the analysis of how teachers communicate with students. In the U.S., teachers tend to focus on rules and routines (Gardner, 1998). In Reggio, there is much more interplay between the teacher and children. Their research as shown something Katz (1998, p. 28) has highlighted as a major flaw in our early education systems:

The Reggio Emilia children’s work suggests to me that many of us seriously underestimate preschool children’s graphical and representational abilities, and the quality of intellectual effort and growth it can engender.

The U.S. is capable of achieving incredible goals. It is possible, one day, for us to come to the same conclusions regarding the value and power of children.

Results and use findings

The documentation of long-term projects stands out as an excellent direct application of qualitative data collection. The data is not collected, condensed, and reported in a thesis; but rather, it is used fully. The emergent and informal nature of the

progettazione is driven by its ability to be adjusted based on new observations. In Italy, the culture is not obsessed with time and accomplishment. Unlike the “time is money” U.S. attitude, the families accept that their children are being exposed to the correct instruction. The families, via the collected documentation, can see what and how their children are learning and processing information. Other nations that share Italy’s notion of time, would probably not have as much difficulty accepting an emergent curriculum. The culture of the U.S. thought is keenly tuned to measurement and efficiency. To be accepted, any emergent curriculum in the U.S. would have develop acknowledging this limitation. The Reggio instructors are well aware of the cultural differences and regularly admonish others to not clone or copy their system but to adopt it based on the needs of their individual circumstances.

The descriptions of their system, although somewhat foreign to the common U.S. conception of education, are easy to understand once an appreciation is given to the guiding principals under which they operate. I truly believe the U.S. educational system is very much akin to a factory system. We take children as input, process them in a consistent and straightforward manner and demand a certain minimum level out performance output. As we advance in knowledge, we will realize there are other models that produce better results. I think we will be more open to alternatives in education in the future.

Implications

In our desire to improve educational practices we may be tempted to copy the Reggio approach. The entire Reggio approach cannot be cloned in other countries. From the founder, Malaguzzi, to current practitioners, all warn of the dangers of attempting to

copy or clone the system wholesale. The simple reason is that the entire system must meet the needs of the culture it serves. The United States has very different views of time, skill acquisition, and views regarding the value of providing the best possible education to children. Our education system is hierarchical. Its structure is rigid and that rigidity reinforces the status quo. For example, the U.S. shifted from an agrarian society over 100 years ago but to this day, with a few exceptions, the design of our school year is for crop planting and harvesting. We admit standardized tests are biased and yet we use more standardized testing and measuring than 10 years ago. Perhaps Dee Hock (1999, p. 123) issues the best warning regarding the state of educational management when he observed this of management in general, “Management expertise has become the creation and control of constants, uniformity, and efficiency, while *the need has become the understanding and coordination of variability, complexity, and effectiveness* [italics added].”

The Reggio system and its “teacher as researcher” concept works because it invites and allows true innovation. It strives to understand more about children’s thinking by using the best research available and listening to children. It is constantly variable and acknowledges the complexity of children and culture. Rather than forcing efficiency, it promotes effectiveness by qualitatively measuring individual performance daily. It has survived forty years of difficulties and change because it has stayed true to the guiding principals at its core.

From my reading about the Reggio system it is clear they honestly believe and are committed to: (a) an intense belief in the *power and present citizenship of children*; (b) a humble admission that all is not known about teaching and learning and that the teacher

must, therefore, be a *constant researcher*; (c) an understanding that the *space of education* is vitally important and worthy of great considerations; and finally, (d) that a system of *interrelated relationships* must exist between the community, families, teachers, and children.

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