Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education

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In Italy both municipal and national programs for young children have been in place for about 25 years, since the enactment of a law establishing that children between the ages of three and six are entitled to free education. This law was followed in 1971 by a law establishing infant/toddler centers that also receive parental financial contributions. In each case, women were especially active and effective advocates for the legislation.

Of special note is that in these programs, both education and care are considered necessary to provide a high-quality, full-day program. These programs combine the concept of social services with education, an approach that is widely accepted in Italy. What, then, is so unusual or special about Reggio Emilia, a town of 130,000 inhabitants in northern Italy?

In Reggio Emilia the city-run educational system for young children originated in schools started by parents, literally built with their own hands, at the end of World War II. The first school was built with proceeds from the sale of a tank, some trucks, and a few horses. From the start, Loris Malaguzzi has guided and directed the energies of parents and educators.

The city now runs 20 schools for children ages three to six years, as well as 13 infant/toddler centers for children four months to three years of age. Children from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds attend the programs: 47% and 35% of the two age groups are served, respectively. In Italy about 90% of children three to six years old attend some kind of school, whether municipal, national, or private; in Reggio Emilia 95% of preschool-age children are enrolled in school. Children with disabilities are given first priority for enrollment in the schools.

Through many years of strong commitment and cooperation, parents and educators in Reggio have developed the present excellent program that, in turn, has become a point of reference and a guide for many educators elsewhere in Italy, in various European countries, and—in the last 10 years—in the United States. Thirty years of successful experience with schools for about half of the children in a city of 130,000 inhabitants has created

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The image of the child

The educators in Reggio Emilia speak first and foremost about the image they have of the child. All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, in engaging in social interaction, and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them. Teachers are deeply aware of children’s potentials and construct all their work and the environment of the children’s experience to respond appropriately.

The three subjects of education

For children to learn, their well-being has to be guaranteed; the well-being of children is connected with the well-being of parents and teachers. Children’s rights should be recognized, not only children’s needs. Children have a right to high-quality care and education. By recognizing that children have rights to the best that a society can offer, parents and teachers gain recognition of their rights as well.

The role of parents

Parent participation is considered essential and takes many forms: day-to-day interaction during work in the schools; discussions of educational and psychological issues; and special events,
excursions, and celebrations. Parents are an active part of their children's learning experience and, at the same time, help ensure the welfare of all children in the school.

An amiable school

The layout of physical space in the schools encourages encounters, communication, and relationships. The arrangement of structures, objects, and activities encourages choices, problem solving, and discoveries in the process of learning. In preparing the space, teachers offer the possibility for children to be with the teachers and many of the other children, or with just a few of the children, or even alone. Teachers are aware, however, that children also learn from their peers, especially when they can interact in small groups.

The time not set by the clock

Children's own sense of time and their personal rhythm are considered in planning and implementing activities and projects. The leisurely pace that an observer notices is facilitated by the full-day schedule. Such a schedule, rather than overwhelming the participants, seems instead to provide sufficient time to complete projects and activities with satisfaction. Teachers get to know the children's personal timeclocks because children stay with the same teachers and the same peer group for three-year cycles (infancy to three and three to six). Each year the group changes environments because their developmental needs and interests change, but the relationships with teachers and peers remain consistent.

Teachers as partners

To know how to plan and proceed with their work, teachers listen to and observe children closely. Teachers use the understanding they gain to act as a resource for the children. Teachers ask questions; discover the children's ideas, hypotheses, and theories; and provide occasions for discovery and learning. In fact, teachers consider themselves partners in learning and enjoy discovering with the children.

Cooperation as the foundation of the system

Cooperation at all levels in the schools is a powerful mode of working that makes possible the achievement of the complex goals that Reggio educators have set for themselves. Teachers work in pairs in each classroom (not as head teacher and assistant but at the same level); teachers maintain a strong collegial relationship with all other teachers and staff and engage in continuous discussion and interpretation of their work as well as of the work of and with children. Those exchanges provide permanent, ongoing training and theoretical enrichment. Teachers see themselves as researchers, preparing documentation of their work with children, whom they also consider researchers. The system is further supported...
Teachers and the atelierista discuss and interpret the children's dialogs together to plan the next steps in their work with the children.

The cooperation between teachers and parents and among teachers is reflected in the way the children work together.

by a team of pedagogical coordinators, called pedagogisti, who also support the relationships among all teachers, parents, and community and city administrators.

The interdependence of cooperation and organization

Cooperation needs much support; in Reggio Emilia schools, cooperation is supported by a careful, well-developed structure or organization. From the details of each teacher’s schedule to the planning of meetings with families to the children’s diet, everything is discussed and organized with precision and care. In fact, the high level of cooperation is possible precisely because of such thoughtful organization; likewise, the organization is achieved because of the conviction by all concerned that by cooperating they will be able to offer the best experience to the children.

Projects

Teachers facilitate children’s exploration of themes and work on short- and long-term projects. Project ideas originate in the continuum of experience of children

This is an episode within a long project about shadows. After exploring their shadows outside, the children drew their hypotheses about the placement of the sun and the resulting shadows. Here a teacher poses a provocative question.
This teacher is called *atelierista*, and a special space, workshop, or studio, called *atelier*, is set aside and used by all the children and teachers. The atelier contains a great variety of tools and resource materials, along with records of past projects and experiences. The educators in Reggio Emilia prefer to speak of many different languages of children (in fact, 100 languages) rather than art. In their view, children’s expression through many media is not a separate part of the curriculum but is inseparable from the whole cognitive/symbolic expression in the process of learning.

### The power of documentation

Finally, 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) done in the schools. This documentation has several functions: to make parents aware of their children’s experience and maintain parental involvement; to allow teachers to understand children better and to evaluate the teachers’ own work, thus promoting their professional growth; to facilitate communication and exchange of ideas among educators; to make children aware that their effort is valued; and to create an archive that traces the history of the school and of the pleasure and process of learning by many children and their teachers.

The Reggio Emilia schools and their approach to early childhood education are not considered “experimental.” These schools are part of a public system that strives to serve both the child’s welfare and the social needs of families while also supporting the child’s fundamental right to grow and learn in a favorable environment with peers and with caring professional adults.