Basic Principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach

Believing that “the potential of children is stunted when the endpoint of their learning is formulated in advance” (Carlina Rinaldi), teachers develop an “emergent curriculum” in collaboration with the learners.

The Hundred Languages of Children

Reggio educators believe that children have the capacity for representing ideas in a wide variety of symbolic and graphic modes. Children need to develop the tools to investigate and make sense of an object about which they are curious. Reggio teachers greatly emphasize various visual and expressive arts as symbolic tools or languages of the children that should be cultivated. The approach emphasizes the importance of children’s symbolic language. The hundred “languages” are the many modes of expression, such as speech, writing, movement, drawing, painting, sculpture, shadow play, collage and music, through which children communicate and learn about their world. Various media, when combined to tell a story, form the 100 languages. Teachers learn to listen to the “100 Languages” that children use to express themselves as individual learners and as “teachers” in their own right.

The Image of the Child

The educators in Reggio Emilia first and foremost always speak about the image they have of the child. Adults see children as competent, full of potential and active in constructing his or her own knowledge through interactions with others. Adults try to understand as fully as possible the child’s viewpoint and abilities. All children have preparedness, potential and curiosity, and interest in engaging in social interaction, establishing relationships, constructing their learning, and negotiating with everything the environment brings to them. Teachers are deeply aware of the children’s potential and construct all their learning and the environment of the children’s experience to respond appropriately. As children participate in their activities, it is important for them to make and correct their own errors. This approach provides the necessary opportunity to become practiced at creative problem solving. Teachers must have enough respect for children in order to permit these processes to occur. Reggio teachers neither provide solutions nor leave children to their own resources. The child-centred curriculum of Reggio Emilia schools is based on this image of children as full of life, power and confidence, rather than full of need.

The Role of the Environment

Through conscious use of space, colour, natural light, displays of children’s work, and attention to nature and detail, the environment serves as another teacher. The environment serves as an invitation to enter and participate. The schools are, of course, 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 appearance of each school is like that of an
excellent, experiential museum for children. Commitment and creativity of teachers and parents are reflected in the attention to detail and design. Intrigue and curiosity result from careful placement of materials and products of children from previous years. Adults and children personalize each school with their message boxes, art, documentation panels and investigations. Many panels convey a sense of history and identity of each school. Colour, light, mirrors, shadows, recyclable materials and natural artefacts including plants are used to enhance the environment and provide discovery opportunities. The layout of physical space, in addition to welcoming whoever enters the schools, fosters encounters, communication and relationships. As suggested by Reggio teachers and other researchers, “children learn more effectively” when they are able to use a wide variety of materials in a wide range of activities and in cooperation with adults who help them ask good questions. In addition, it is desirable to provide environmental support that is a real collaboration among school, families and the community.

The Role of the Teacher

Teachers facilitate children’s ability to represent what they know and imagine. Teachers mediate between children’s current understanding and what they are on the threshold of understanding by: reviewing and helping children tell the story of their own learning; arranging new experiences, challenges and problems; connecting children with resources; facilitating group discussions and social interactions; reflecting children’s ideas; and facilitating the development of new skills. To know how to plan or proceed with the children’s learning, teachers observe and listen to them closely. Teachers use the understanding they gain in this way to act as a resource for them. They ask questions and discover the children’s ideas, hypotheses and theories. Then the adults discuss together what they have recorded through their own notes, or audio or visual recordings, and make flexible plans and preparations. Then they are ready to enter again into dialogues with the children and offer them occasions for discovering and also revisiting experiences since they consider themselves to be partners in this process of learning which might proceed with pauses and setbacks, but which is an experience constructed and enjoyed together with the children. The role of teachers, therefore, is considered to be one of continual research and learning process, taking place with the children and embedded in team cooperation. Doing research, reflecting, and listening to children together with other colleagues, contributes to a situation of continuous individual and group professional growth.

The Importance of Time

Investigations and themes follow the children’s interest and development of concepts. Investigations and activities are not “one-shot deals”; rather they build upon one another over time, as experiences, activities and forms of expression. Children know that their “work” will remain intact and in place until they have completed their task. Children have the time and guidance to use the same materials repeatedly until they are pleased with the results. Time is not set by the clock, and continuity is not interrupted by the calendar. Children’s own sense of time and their personal rhythm are considered in planning and carrying out activities and investigations. Teachers get to know the personal time of the children and each child’s particular characteristics.
The Value of Relationships and Interaction of Children in Small Groups

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 them, or even alone when they need a little niche to stay by themselves. However, teachers are always aware that children learn a great deal in exchanges with their peers, especially when they can interact in small groups. Such small groups of two, three, four or five children provide possibilities for paying attention, hearing and listening to each other, developing curiosity and interest, asking questions, and responding to them. It provides opportunities for negotiation and dynamic communication. This type of small group also favours the emergence of cognitive conflicts that can initiate a process in which children construct together new learning and development.

Observation and Documentation

As the teacher’s role becomes more of an observer and documenter, she becomes a facilitator and co-learner. The way the Reggio teachers facilitate the learning is by asking questions that lead children to other thoughts and further actions. The teacher also provides books and other resources on investigation topics that children examine in order to make relevant decisions. The teachers explain that they learn how to work with children by continuously observing. The teachers do not rely solely on their memory but document interactions and learning by audio or visual taking, writing notes and taking slides or photographs of the children. Transcripts of children’s remarks and discussions, photographs of their activity, and representations of their thinking and learning using many media are carefully arranged by teachers, to document the children’s learning (and the process of learning) done in schools. This documentation has several functions:

- Documentation contributes to the extensiveness and depth of the learning gained by the children from their investigations and other learning.
- Documentation makes it possible for parents to become acutely aware of their children’s experiences at school. Parents are aware of their children’s experience and maintain their involvement.
- Documentation is an important kind of teacher research allowing teachers to understand children better and to evaluate the teacher’s own work, thus promoting their professional growth.
- Documentation makes children aware that their efforts are valued.
- Documentation creates an archive that traces the history of the school and the pleasure of learning by many children and their teachers.
- Documentation provides information about children’s learning and progress that cannot be demonstrated by tests and checklists.
The Curriculum

The curriculum is not established in advance. Teachers express general goals and make hypotheses about what direction activities and investigations might take; consequently, they make appropriate preparations. Then, after observing children in action, they 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 develops in the process of each activity or investigation and is flexibly adjusted accordingly through this continuous dialogue among teachers and children. Children pursue extensive investigations of their world, guided by teachers who share their sense of adventure and “amazement”.

Investigations

Investigations provide the backbone of the children’s and teacher’s learning experiences. They are based on the strong convictions that learning by doing is of great importance and that to discuss in groups and to revisit ideas and experiences is the primary way of gaining better understanding and learning.

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

Investigations can be based on any relevant topic such as shadows, reflections, dinosaurs or rain in the city.

Their distinguishing aspects included the following:

- The teacher’s role is that of both facilitator and partner in learning;
- Topic selection is based on student interests and experiences;
- Collaboration occurs among students, teachers and parents;
- Investigation content emerges from students’ spiralling understanding;
- Multiple experiences occur with the same and different media in order to represent cognition;
- Repetition of activities takes place for different purposes;
- Extended time may be devoted to an investigation;
- Investigations are usually small-group rather than whole-class;
- An investigation should include a broad range of concepts, such as maths, science, art, writing, social studies and music.