

# A Reflective Analysis of the Reggio Emergent Curriculum

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## **Introduction**

Throughout my teaching experience and M.A. studies, I have become increasingly intrigued by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education and its emphasis on child-centered emergent curriculum. A former mentor teacher of mine was inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. I admired her ability to develop rich and engaging art-integrated projects that considered children's interests while still complying with state standards. The projects that I observed were exemplary models of developmentally appropriate curriculum driven by children's play. Current U.S. educational policies tend to forego developmentally appropriate practice in preparing young children for college and career. The positive experiences that I gleaned from my mentor teacher have motivated me to further investigate the child-centered curriculum which is the foundation of the Italian Reggio Emilia education system.

As a future teacher, I am passionate about placing the child at the center of curriculum, teaching, and learning experiences. I believe that more attention needs to be given to child-centered curriculum in this age of standards-based education. Children's needs, strengths, and interests should be embedded in curriculum development in order to awaken the "spirit of the child" (Montessori, 2013, p. 27) and develop a life-long love of learning. The teachers of Reggio Emilia have perfected this type of curriculum with young children for more than 40 years (NAREA, 2014). In the following section, I will explore emergent curriculum in the context of the Reggio Emilia approach. We will first begin by defining the term 'emergent curriculum' and its theoretical curriculum origins.

### **Defining Emergent Curriculum**

The term 'emergent curriculum' was coined by Elizabeth Jones in a 1970 issue of *Young Children* from an article called *Curriculum Is What Happens* (Jones, 2012). Jones was asked by Laura Dittman, the then editor of *Young Children* to contribute to a collected work on curriculum planning in early childhood education. As Jones offered the title *Curriculum Is What Happens*, Dittman insisted on adding "*Planning is the Key.*" Jones agreed with this title modification, as long as they were clear in her belief that "planning is done all along the way by program staff and not in advance by "expert" strangers who have never met the program's children" (Jones, 2012, p. 66). Jones's ideas about curriculum were largely influenced by her work in a 1950s university preschool lab where the adults "set the stage" for children's explorations. Jones (2012) described the laboratory as a rich learning environment where teachers focused their energy on observing children at play. Teachers recorded anecdotal notes and made plans from day to day in response to their observations and reflections on children's interactions. "Curriculum was set down only after it had taken place, not laid out in advance except in broad terms" (Jones, 2012, p. 66). Jones believed that curriculum is simply what happens in an educational environment. Although the curriculum may be prescribed as in today's increasingly standardized education, Jones believed that preplanned curriculum was inappropriate for children as often times it is created by unknown experts and developed outside of children's direct experiences. However, emergent curriculum activities originate from teacher observations of a particular group of children.

According to Jones (2012), “the goal of emergent curriculum is to respond to every child’s interests” (p. 67). Its practice is open-ended and depends on teacher initiative and intrinsic motivation, and lends itself to a play-based environment. In order to develop a curriculum, teachers must embrace children’s questions and fascinations about their environment and then create ways to involve them, document results, and facilitate further inquiry and investigation. Jones believed that early childhood educators should be granted the flexibility to develop curriculum based on children’s strengths and interests. When curriculum is motivated by children’s questions and interests, knowledge is obtained rather than imposed by adults. From an emergent perspective, curriculum is not fixed and evolves with the forever-changing experiences of children (Jones, 2012).

Jones (1994) collaborated with a colleague, John Nimmo, who had pursued his doctoral research in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, to develop emergent curriculum theories. According to Jones (2012) by the late 1990s, Reggio Emilia preschools had become a world-renowned model for emergent curriculum built on the strengths of children. To Jones, the Reggio Emilia schools concretized her theory of a curriculum which is based primarily on children’s experiences. The curriculum found within all Reggio schools, both traditional and inspired, is co-constructed by children, adults, and the environment. The following section will discuss the background and brief history of these early childhood schools.

### **Historical Overview of the Reggio Emilia Schools**

Reggio Emilia is a wealthy province in Northern Italy and is the site of one of the most renowned, innovative, and high quality early childhood systems in the world

(Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Reggio Emilia is well-known for its agricultural and industrial productivity as well as for its art and architecture (New, 1990). The groundwork for what is now referred to as the “Reggio Emilia approach” is deeply rooted in the region’s long history of resistance to social injustice and its alliance with Italy’s socialist and communist parties (New, 1993).

Shortly after World War II, some of the parents in Reggio Emilia claimed abandoned buildings and petitioned authorities to help them build new schools for their young children. The first school was built literally by the hands of parents using proceeds gained from the sale of war tanks, horses, and trucks left by retreating World War II German troops (Hewett, 2001). The late Loris Malaguzzi, who was then a young teacher and up-and-coming early childhood philosopher, was appointed by the parents to assist in establishing schools that would go beyond traditional custodial care. Malaguzzi encouraged parents to build schools where even the youngest children would be taken seriously, inspiring them to acquire the necessary skills of collaboration and critical thinking in order to thrive in a free and democratic society (New, 2007).

The innovative visions of Malaguzzi and the parents helped found the first municipal preschool in 1963 (Gandini & Malaguzzi, 1998). The opening of that school played a major role in the enactment of Italy’s 1968 national law which instituted funding for public preschools (New, 2000). The essential role and intimate involvement of parents in their children’s education became a fundamental element of the Reggio Emilia approach. To this day, parents and community members continue to ensure their schools reflect the values of the community (Hewett, 2001).

Children from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds attend Reggio Emilia schools, with disabled children receiving first priority. Over 10% of the province's budget goes toward supporting the Reggio Emilia early childhood schools. Through collaborative efforts, 13 public infant-toddler and 22 pre-primary schools for children ages 3 through 6 have been established in the province of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 1998).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) held its first global public presentation on Reggio Emilia at their annual conference in Anaheim in 1987. Since its initial exposure in the U.S., American interest in Reggio Emilia has grown at a remarkable rate (New, 2000). A few years after the NAEYC presentation, *Newsweek* published an article in 1991 selecting the preschools in Reggio Emilia to be among the best schools in the world (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1991). Over the past two decades, the name of this Italian province has become the gold standard for high quality early childhood education internationally (New, 2007).

### **Curricular Origin of the Reggio Emergent Curriculum**

The concept of 'emergent curriculum' was not new to the world of education when Jones coined the term nor was it an invention by the teachers of Reggio Emilia. The origins of emergent curriculum and its child-centered roots were main features of the Progressive Education Movement and John Dewey in the early twentieth century (Katz, 1998).

The Progressive Education Movement viewed teachers as guides or facilitators. With the teacher serving as a guide, the child naturally assumed the role of an apprentice exploring under someone more knowledgeable (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2012). In both Reggio and Progressivist curriculum theory, teachers and students are equally involved in the

learning progress, including exploration of ideas, selecting techniques and materials to be used, and collaboratively supervising the progress of projects. Progressive thinkers would commend the Reggio approach in that teachers act as “group leaders” as they co-construct curriculum activities together with their students (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2012).

Progressive educators placed a high value on children’s interests, needs, and development (Labaree, 2005). In the Reggio approach, teachers are committed to facilitating curriculum activities that directly emerge from children’s interests, questions, and curiosities. The interests that emerge from the child serve as the foundation for long-term, small-group investigation projects (Katz, 1998). These traits closely align with the Progressive Education Movement. The movement focused on social relationships and collaborative group-learning. Progressive educators promoted learning experiences that emphasized cooperative behaviors and rejected any attempts to isolate education from social reality (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2012).

Progressivist theorist, John Dewey, believed that education was participatory and emergent, not preparatory and absolute (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2012). In the Reggio emergent curriculum, planned objectives are blended with “emergent objectives” (Forman, 1993, p. 360) in order to value the child’s day-to-day experiences. Eisner (2013) would agree with this notion of “emergent objectives” as he believed that the outcomes of curriculum and instruction cannot be determined with accuracy. Eisner believed that imposing requirements upon the process of learning was absurd. The Reggio emergent curriculum resonates with Eisner’s belief that educational objectives need not precede the selection and organization of content. This reflects back to what Jones (2012) said about how emergent curriculum only gets written after it has taken place.

The Reggio approach focuses on the progressive notion of the “living present” (Bagley, 2013, p. 77) where teachers plan curriculum that is propelled by the individual and social experiences of children. The Reggio approach to curriculum flowers off the roots of progressive education where teachers and students plan curriculum together. As in the Reggio emergent curriculum, progressive education viewed students as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive targets of instruction (Katz, 1998). Reggio teachers are much like the progressive educators during the early twentieth century as they believed in guiding children in helping them locate, analyze, interpret, and evaluate experiences to formulate conclusions on their own (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2012).

This progressive teacher-child relationship that is present in the Reggio schools is a major influence on their educational process (New, 1990). The following sections will explore the roles of the learner and teacher in the Reggio Emilia approach.

### ***Loris Malaguzzi, An Education Based on Relationships***

In the Reggio approach, knowledge is constructed within the context of child-child and child-adult relationships. Because teachers and parents consider isolation from one another a hindrance to professional and child development (New, 1990), emphasis is placed on learning as a group and developing a sense of “we.” Reggio Emilia educators use the phrase, “*lo chi siamo*” or “I am who we are” to express their belief in sustaining a shared learning community (Rankin, 1998). Malaguzzi (1993) proposed that early childhood professionals consider a triad at the center of education—children, teachers and families—and to intensify the interrelationships among them. In Reggio schools, teachers and learners collaborate through cyclical paths of communication, caring, and control. Ve



Vecchi (1998), a teacher at one of the Reggio schools, expressed her feelings about collaboration: “Working together, guiding the children in their projects, teachers and I have repeatedly found ourselves face to face – as if looking in a mirror – learning from one another, and together learning from the children” (p. 141). Malaguzzi (1993) upheld a vision for an “education based on relationships” (p. 9). He abided by the educational principle that schools should be “open and democratic, inviting exchange of ideas and suppressing distance between people” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10). To Malaguzzi, interaction among children was an innate need, a desire and vital necessity within each child. He believed that young children actively constructed knowledge within the context of their social relationships. Malaguzzi believed that children participate in constructing their identity and the identity of others through a continual network of communication.

Malaguzzi (1993) considered small groups to be the most favorable type of classroom organization. In the Reggio approach, learning takes place within the structure of small groups. In these small groups, children engage in discussions with their peers and adults to assist them in constructing and reconstructing their ideas. Malaguzzi believed that groups of two, three, or four children were desirable, allowing for efficient communication. “Small group interaction will include processes of imitation, pauses, and excessive leaps forward...” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 11). Interactions among children naturally incite cognitive conflicts that result from the exchanges of different ideas and actions. These social experiences promote higher cognitive functioning and further learning and development in young children. Only when children articulate to others what they believe to be true do they come face-to-face with errors in their own thinking. Through their interactions, children are motivated to define and refine what they know resulting in a more

sophisticated understanding. Malaguzzi believed that cognitive conflicts encourage children to become more cooperative. Each interaction among children can produce different reactions, enriching personal relationships, and improving listening, verbal and nonverbal communication. In the Reggio Emilia approach, the child is viewed as a budding social being. Malaguzzi advocated that children learn by actively interacting with their environment and transforming their relationships with peers and adults in building a strong learning community (Malaguzzi, 1993).

### **Roles of the Learner**

***The Child as Having Rights.*** In the Reggio emergent curriculum, the child is viewed as having “rights” (Malaguzzi, 1994). In this belief, Reggio teachers view the child as beautiful, powerful, competent, creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires (Gandini & Rinaldi, 1998). Malaguzzi (1994) expressed that the child’s thoughts and work should be taken seriously and respected; therefore, the act of listening to the child should serve as the focus of curriculum and instruction. The responsibility of listening and responding to children’s natural “rights” is taken very seriously by adults. Adults put great faith in children to accomplish tasks on their own before they step in and intervene with help (Gandini & Malaguzzi, 1998). Adults also provide adequate support and resources for those who are most vulnerable in society, those with “special rights” (Smith, 1998). Small-groups of children of varying abilities, including those with “special rights” (aka special needs) are encouraged to work together in school. According to Malaguzzi (1993) “if the children had legitimate rights, then they also should have opportunities to develop their intelligence and to be made ready for the success that would not, and should not, escape

them” (p. 51). When a teacher is able to understand the child’s “rights,” only then will they be able to successfully promote their intelligence to contribute creative inventions and designs to the life of the culture around them (Wein, 2008).

***Child as an Active Constructor of Knowledge.*** The concept of the child having rights occupies children’s roles as active learners in Reggio Emilia. In the Reggio approach, learning is not something that is done to the child, but rather something that they achieve by doing (Hewett, 2001). The child is viewed as possessing the competence, strength, and innate desire to actively discover, inquire, and make sense of their world (Malaguzzi, 1994). A major aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach is the way in which children go about constructing meaning and communicating their thinking and ideas to others. Talk is perhaps one of the central forms of meaning for the children in Reggio Emilia. Children use their right to speak to actively construct knowledge as they refine and clarify their understandings of topics through small-group discussion (Malaguzzi, 1993). In an ethnographic study of children’s play in Italian preschools, Corsaro (2003) noted that young children in Italy commonly engaged in *discussione*, which are conversations characterized by long, complex debate and negotiation. *Discussiones* are often well-developed and arise between two or three kids and eventually includes the whole class. In these discussions, anyone can participate and everyone’s voice is listened to and acknowledged. *Discussiones* are at the heart of Italian children’s peer culture, resulting in these children becoming quite skilled in the art of debate. To the children, the lively disputes that occur in *discussiones* are much more important than any eventual resolution. *Discussiones* assist Reggio children in developing social problem solving skills such as

negotiation, decision-making, and choice-making in cooperation with peers and adults. All of these child-initiated forms of creating meaning reflect Malaguzzi's (1998) focus on "active education" (p. 53) where children learn within a highly interactive and communicative environment.

### **Roles of the Teacher**

*Teacher as a Guide.* Although the teachers in the Reggio approach are partners with the child throughout the learning process, they also serve as guides and facilitators (Edwards et al., 1998). Within this role, the teacher does not sit back and simply observe a child construct their own knowledge; rather, they play an active role in providing children with the necessary support and tools to advance their learning (Hewett, 2001). In the Reggio emergent curriculum, the teacher is "inside the learning situation" and is attuned to each child's levels of ability (Edwards, 1998). Malaguzzi (1994) expressed that "the teacher has to be the author of a play, someone who thinks ahead of time. Teachers also need to be the main actors in the play, the protagonists. Teachers also have to play the role of prompter, the one who gives the cues to the actors. Teachers need to be set designers who create the environment in which activities take place" (p. 4). Through Malaguzzi's analogies, he eloquently summarizes the many roles teachers play, serving as guides in directing student learning in a way that supports the group as a whole.

Lella Gandini (2009), Reggio Emilia liaison to the United States, explained that at times children depend on teachers to teach them the skills needed for further growth. Without periodic teacher interventions, children might become frustrated, give up and never experience the joys of discovery (Staley, 1998). The role of the teacher as a guide in

the Reggio approach aligns with Lev Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky, a prominent child development theorist, defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Reggio teachers follow Vygotsky's ZPD model as they continually observe children in order to appropriately support them through their learning processes.

***Teacher as Researcher.*** Teachers assume the role of researcher through the act of documentation (Wein, 2011). Documentation is a form of teacher research that sharpens teachers' attention on understanding the intentions and experiences of children as well as their own work with the children (Katz, 1998). Documentation occurs when teachers study children and collect student work samples at several different stages of completion. Documentation may include photographs of children working, artwork, videos, and transcribed audio recordings of children's conversations as they engage in collaborative interactions with peers and adults (Seitz, 2008). Documentation is the act of making the learning processes of children visible; it traces the steps of how children move from one form of knowledge to another (Rinaldi, 2012). Through observing and listening to children, teachers ascertain critical knowledge in the development and learning of children. According to Rinaldi (2012), the process of documentation deepens teachers' awareness of each child's progress. The teacher and students continually revisit the work produced, recorded comments, conversations, and photographs of students' learning activities. This back-and-forth examination of documentation helps the teacher and students negotiate a

curriculum that is based upon children's ongoing actions and interests (Seitz, 2008).

Documentation evidence is displayed through many formats, including class books, portfolios, bulletin boards, digital slide shows, and other creative products (Wein, 2011).

An effective piece of documentation tells the story of an event or experience (Seitz, 2008). The evidence displayed through documentation helps parents understand the purpose for the actions which take place in the classroom. Documentation provides parents with a rich "visual education" (Vecchi, 1998, p. 141) providing rich content for teacher-parent and child-parent discussion. When documentation is displayed and shared with parents, parents become active participants in the curriculum as they may facilitate their input and involvement in future curriculum activities (Hewett, 2001).

In addition to documentation benefiting teachers and parents, most importantly, it promotes children's social-construction of knowledge. When teacher-researchers document and display children's work, it helps the children reflect on their progress and growth as community (Seitz, 2008). Documentation also lets children know that adults take their work and ideas seriously (Katz, 1998).

### **Project Work**

The Reggio belief that teachers need to learn more about children to better teach them resulted in a curriculum approach known as *progettazione* or long-term in-depth project work (Gandini & Rinaldi, 1998). Project work in Reggio Emilia refers to in-depth studies of particular topics undertaken by groups of children (Katz, 1998).

New (2007) explained that the starting point of project work begins with children's efforts to understand something about their physical or social worlds. Both Reggio teachers

and students may pose questions such as “How does the fountain work?” practical propositions such as “Let’s make a wheel!” or explore a philosophical dilemma such as “Can an enemy become a friend?” As these hypotheses are posed, teachers create conditions in which children can explore those ideas and frame new hypotheses as a result. These experiences form the heart of the Reggio emergent curriculum.

Reggio educators integrate curriculum goals carefully within open-ended projects of inquiry facilitated in partnership with the students. Such work increases children’s self-confidence in their own intellectual powers and strengthens their dispositions to learn (Katz, 1998). Allowing the curriculum to emerge from the interests of children, opens up a world of possibilities in the classroom. Project work is an intellectual and collaborative adventure that is satisfying to teachers, children and their parents (Edwards, 1993).

Since the child is placed at the center of emergent curriculum, Reggio teachers refrain from controlling all aspects of a project. Instead, teachers are encouraged to find ways to stimulate the interests of children through the discovery process (Edwards et al., 1998). Edwards (1993) stated that Reggio teachers “set the stage” for a project by offering interesting provocations. A provocation might involve a change to the classroom environment, verbalizing open-ended questions, a thought-provoking discussion, or an intriguing event that facilitates inquiry-based conversations among children. For example, Reggio teachers may place books or photos of space shuttles near the classroom building block area to peak children’s interest in the theme of space. As teachers offer provocations, they take the opportunity to listen and observe children during their interactions. Reggio teachers seize these important opportunities to take photographs of students at play and jot down brief anecdotal notes about topics that seem to excite, surprise, and spark

children's curiosity. Once a significant amount of data has been collected, teachers ponder appropriate curriculum directions and decisions that have been implicitly suggested and inspired by their students' interactions.

According to Katz (1998) topics for project work should be relevant to children's lives. Reggio teachers take full advantage children's own immediate environments and first-hand experiences for the foundation of project work. Unlike many U.S. teachers who tend to introduce esoteric curriculum topics under the assumption that everyday objects and events are uninteresting, Reggio teachers seek to "defamiliarize" everyday objects and events in making them meaningful, interesting, and instructive to young children. Familiar topics such as an exploration of their school garden, a local farmer's market, or investigating the school after a rainfall provides children with many opportunities to contribute to the project from their own knowledge, and suggest questions and investigations to pursue. The children themselves gain the opportunity to take leadership in planning for specific observations as well as information and artifacts to be gathered. If a project topic is outside children's direct experiences, they may become dependent on the teacher for most of the questions, ideas, information, thinking, and planning. However, it should be noted that sometimes Reggio teachers initiate projects on topics that are hardly within children's immediate experiences, but grow out of children's great interests and responses. In the following section we will examine a project that was documented in a Reggio Emilia school.



***The Dinosaur Project.*** Rankin (1998) researched the process of a long-term curriculum project about dinosaurs in a 5 and 6 year old class at the Anne Frank School in Reggio Emilia. The teacher took notice of the dinosaur toys that children were bringing to school and how spontaneous play often occurred around these toys. Children's interest in dinosaurs prompted the teacher to begin an educational journey and study dinosaurs in-depth. Before beginning the project, the teachers discussed many possibilities and potential directions that the project could take. After explaining to all the children in the class that they would be studying dinosaurs for a while, the teachers initiated an investigation of dinosaurs with a small group of those children who were most interested. They embarked on the project by first drawing dinosaurs around a large table. As the children drew together, they commented and questioned each other's drawings, assisting each other in the co-construction of knowledge about dinosaurs as one student exclaimed to another: "Oh, that's not a dinosaur, dinosaurs have four legs!" After children finished their drawings, teachers spoke individually with them about his or her drawings, asking a series of open-ended questions such as Where did dinosaurs live? What did they eat? Are dinosaurs living now? These questions fueled a great deal of interest and response from the children to propel the project work forward. Children were later offered clay to construct dinosaurs and they also took a trip to the local library to gather books about dinosaurs. The quest for more knowledge came in the form of a letter composed by the dinosaur group. Their teacher helped the children write a letter to relatives and friends to ask if they could share their knowledge about dinosaurs in order to attain a more sophisticated understanding of

them. Children compared their drawings of dinosaurs to those in books and then used the books to help formulate and clarify new questions about their project.

Throughout children's dinosaur activities, teachers noticed a recurring theme that kept arising—the physical size and dimension of dinosaurs. Children engaged in shadow play where images of dinosaurs were projected on walls, they also built a collaborative group dinosaur sculpture from clay. These activities allowed children to ponder the large dimensions of dinosaurs. Following up on this theme of size, their teacher proposed that the children build a really large dinosaur. The children and teacher discussed what kinds of materials to use, how to use them, even deciding on a specific type of dinosaur for their construction. The children produced dinosaur models made from styrofoam, metal, and wire. Still noticing that the theme of size was still a topic of interest to the children, their teacher challenged the group to draw a life-size dinosaur and find somewhere to hang it, so it could be seen standing upright on its feet. After choosing a drawing of a dinosaur from one of their books, the children created a grid on graph paper and were able to figure out the length of several of its body parts to use in their drawing. After much trial and error with materials and rigorous measuring tasks, the children's hard work resulted in a drawing of a 13 x 6 meter *Diplodocus* to fit in the courtyard behind their school which they eventually painted.

The children in the dinosaur group were eager to share what they had learned and accomplished with the rest of the school and community. They prepared an exhibit, laying out the activities they had done and the steps they had gone through. They displayed drawings and sculptures created during the course of their project, prepared invitations and posters for family and friends, and thought of other ways to make a presentation to

their classmates. The adults at the school had arranged for the dinosaur painting to be raised vertically by a set of pulleys which were attached to a high fence in the school's sports field. This exciting culminating exhibit was a celebration to remember for both parents and children as they finally saw their creation raised to its feet. Rankin's detailed documentation of project work in Reggio Emilia was truly an emergent experience. The adults experienced firsthand that the interest of the child is key in developing vital educational experiences. The process of project work fostered a rich interconnectedness of child, teacher, and community relationships through an integrated curricular approach.

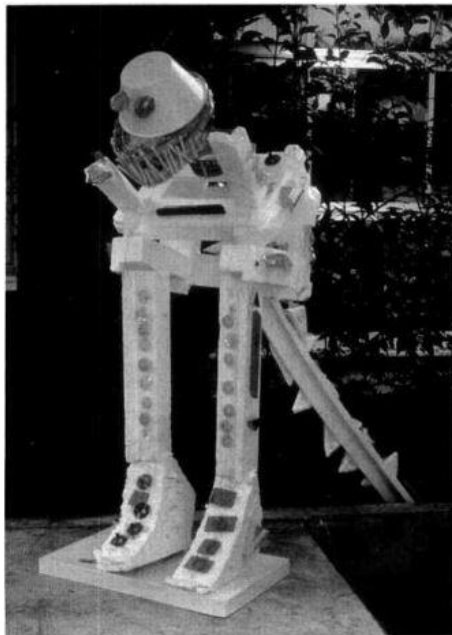


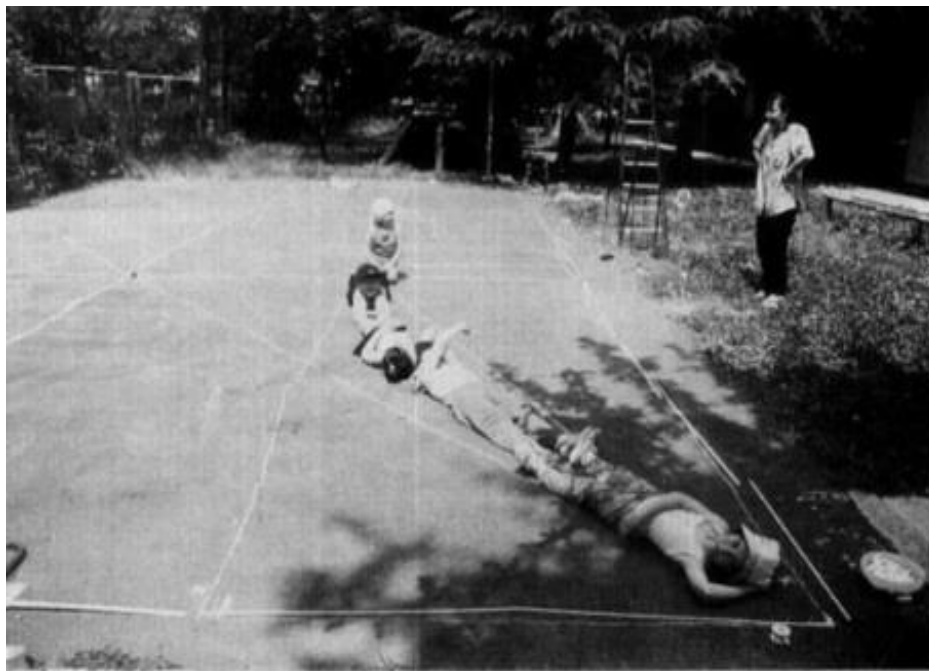
FIGURE 12.1. Four girls collaborated on building a Tyrannosaurus Rex out of Styrofoam—decorating it in style.



FIGURE 12.8. At the inauguration of the painting, the dinosaur stands on its own feet!



**FIGURE 12.3.** After finding the three meter sticks in the school insufficient to measure the length of 27 meters, the children return to the *atelier* to find other objects they could use. They discover several plastic rods which Roberta measures: they are one meter long!



**FIGURE 12.7.** How many children do you think can fit in the tail of the dinosaur?

*Photos from Rankin (1998)*

### **The Role of Art and Materials in the Reggio Emilia Approach**

In the Reggio Emilia approach, art is the medium by which children are encouraged to communicate (Hertzog, 2001). Reggio teachers understand that young children interact with their environment through sensory and nonlinguistic forms of cognition (Wright, 1997). Malaguzzi claimed that “the child has a hundred languages” (Malaguzzi, cited in Hawkins, 1998). The metaphor for “hundred languages” refers to each material, including speech, music, poetry, painting, drawing, puppetry, etc that has the potential to become a language for children to communicate an understanding of their world (Tarr, 2008).

Art media and materials are deeply embedded in the Reggio emergent curriculum. Art is the vehicle for “making learning and thinking visible” to others. In the Reggio emergent curriculum, each “language” that is made available to children guides them in their “natural unfolding” (Wright, 1997, p. 363) of talent, knowledge, and skills. Art facilitates a mode of teaching and learning that emphasizes freedom for the child and awakens their spirit to be creative. Art encourages the children of Reggio Emilia to make spontaneous responses, enhance their ability to release their inner self, make connections, and interpret the world in multiple ways. According to Katz (1998), art in Reggio Emilia schools is not taught as a separate subject, discipline or discrete sets of skills, or focus of instruction of its own sake. Instead, art is deeply embedded into the life of the school and curriculum as additional languages available to children who are not yet competent in conventional reading and writing. The belief that art is inseparable from the rest of the curriculum is central to teaching and learning in Reggio Emilia schools (New, 1990).

The following case studies illustrate how art serves as children's primary languages, a vital means of communication and knowledge construction through the Reggio emergent curriculum.

Rabitti (1994) sought to achieve a deeper understanding of how art-integrated emergent project work was implemented in Reggio Emilia schools. Rabitti tracked a project she called the "Wind Machine." Rabitti reported that one child came back from playing a P.E. game that included "racing" balloons by blowing them to a particular line. The child wanted to invent a machine to blow balloons and some other students took up the idea as well. Rabitti documented the students going into the *atelier* or art studio and discussing it with the *atelierista* or art teacher and together, initiated a collaborative plan to create the machine. Each task throughout the production of the "wind machine" naturally involved art and materials in some form including: (a) drawings based on conversations about the construction of the wind machine, (b) critique of the drawings, (c) discussion of the materials named in the conversation to be used in the machine, (d) sharing of the project with the families, (e) searching for the materials inside the school and at home, (f) construction of the wood structure, (g) gluing of paper to the structure, and (h) decoration of the structure. The production of the wind machine involved many art processes such as drawing blueprints, discussing and searching for materials to be used, and the construction and decoration of the machine. In an interview with an *atelierista*, Rabitti summarized the concept of art in the context of the Reggio Emilia schools:

Art means to have more languages and more languages mean different ways of looking at the world. It means the skill to "defamiliarize" situations, daily events as well as objects ...look at the different representations of the [same] objects around the school, such as the dandelions downstairs. ...We would like our children not to stop at the first impression: we want them to have more images of one thing, a wealth of images. (Rabitti, 1992, p. 20-21)

Rabitti's study demonstrates how art drives the emergent curriculum in Reggio Emilia schools. The teacher exercised the role of collaborator through an "alert, inspired facilitation and stimulation of children's dialogue, co-action, and co-construction of knowledge" (Edwards, 1998, p. 154). The students were seen as the primary constructors of knowledge using the "languages" they found most appropriate. Overall, Rabitti's study exemplified how children's emergent ideas were translated into a tangible product (the wind machine) using the languages of art. The purposeful conversations and production that occurred in the atelier were a catalyst for communicating children's thinking and making learning visible.

The Reggio schools are unique in that *pedagogistas* or curriculum specialists and *atelieristas* or art teachers work hand in hand in Reggio Emilia schools. The art teachers in Reggio schools serve as "constant consultants" (Vecchi, 1998, p. 147) to other teachers in helping them see the visual possibilities of themes and projects. Hertzog (2001) claimed that art teachers in Reggio schools are not seen as peripheral, specialty teachers like in most U.S. elementary schools, rather they are valued members of the community of teachers. Reggio atelieristas, who are trained in the arts, make sure children have the tools they need to communicate their understandings through various media.

Each school contains a large space dedicated to *ateliers* or art studios. These spaces are aesthetically pleasing environments where art materials are plentiful and accessible to the children (Hertzog, 2001). According to Vecchi (1998), the atelier serves two functions. First, it provides children with an opportunity and space to master all types of symbolic languages such as drawing, painting, and working in clay. Second, "it helps teachers

understand how children invent autonomous vehicles of expressive freedom, cognitive freedom, and symbolic freedom” (p. 140).



*Diana School atelier from Edwards et al. (1998)*

Reggio schools are stocked with a plethora of materials contributed by the *Remedia*, or recycling centers which supply materials to the ateliers in Reggio schools. Reclaimed materials that originate from *Remedia* might be newly purchased, recycled from previous projects or donated by community members. Young children are free to choose their own materials which they will use in their own imaginative creations (Kang, 2007). Engaging in active exploration and construction with reclaimed materials challenges children to reconsider the notion of “valuable” as they look at everyday objects with a new perspective. Reggio children’s constant interaction and exposure to a wide variety of reclaimed materials, deepens their understanding of the cultural artifacts in their environment, advances their repertoire and knowledge of languages, and invites meaningful communication and collaboration through shared investigations of materials between children and teachers (Eckhoff & Spearman, 2009).



Kang (2007) explored the role of materials in the Balducci preschool in Reggio Emilia and how children used them as multiple forms of communication. In the school's atelier, Kang counted more than fifty natural materials. These natural materials included dried leaves, flowers, fruit, branches, and seeds. Kang also observed natural materials which were combined with other media such as clay, light, and beads. Other recycled materials included pipes, wire, bike wheels, fishing nets, construction parts, and parts from old technology.

In one of the schools, Kang observed several children analyzing a photo of a bird spreading its wings. Curious and intrigued by the bird photo, the children chose to draw the bird on letter-sized paper. In another observation, Kang documented a boy and girl creating a replica of a garden using a wide variety of materials. The two children created their flower garden on top of a light table. The children used dried flowers, leaves, rhinestones and wrinkled green paper that became the grass around the flowers, and a cluster of sliced green plastic to resemble a bush. The children complemented the dried flowers by turning colorful candy wrappers into a bouquet of flowers. It was clear from this observation that children's active exploration of materials provoked their emerging ideas and interests.

Kang noted that the Reggio teachers used materials as emergent curricular provocations such as mirrors, light tables, and overhead projectors for children to explore diverse perspectives. By using projectors, students enlarged images and were able to closely observe materials for their intricate details, such as the textures of leaves that cannot be seen with the naked eye. A documentation display detailed how a horse drawn by a child elicited high-interest conversations about horses and riding attempts among the

children. Reggio teachers also aesthetically arranged and “prepared palettes of colors” with pens, paper, and sand in translucent containers for children to develop their understanding of color theory.

The wide selection of materials available to children in Reggio schools allows them to express themselves uninhibitedly. Children’s thoughts, ideas, interests, and understandings are directly represented through tangible means. Likewise, the materials also enhance the opportunities for reciprocal exchanges between student and teachers (Hewett, 2001). Kang exemplified how Reggio teachers use the materials to stimulate children’s emergent interests.

Forman (1998) discussed the concept of “multisymbolic learning,” the method of using a variety of languages to construct knowledge about a concept/theme of a project. This idea is evidenced in the “City in the Snow,” a Reggio-inspired project where children represented their theories about snowfall through multiple media. Children illustrated their initial theories of what their city might look like during snowfall. They simulated snowfall by sifting baking flour onto a miniature city of wooden blocks, and created murals of their city before and after the snow fall. The children also observed photographs of snowflakes under a microscope and drew their own representations of snowflakes using a variety of media including white chalk on black paper, pieces of colored paper, beans, macaroni, and parquetry blocks. In this example, the children had the freedom to create their own representation of snowflakes using their own materials.

In addition to engaging children in multisymbolic learning, Reggio teachers initiate field experiences to connect to children’s hands-on activities. “It is the *hands-off* activities that make the *hands-on* activities more educational.” (Forman, 1998, p. 367). The artwork

done during the pre and post snow-fall was remarkable to view; it really exemplified the way children's learnings were recorded and made visible. Children in collaboration with peers and adults, use art as their chosen medium to constantly construct and deconstruct their thinking. Malaguzzi believed that the more "languages" we introduce into a child's education, the richer the school becomes (Rabitti, 1994).

### **The Environment**

Gandini & Rinaldi (1998) expressed that curriculum planning in Reggio Emilia is understood as a "sense of preparation and organization of space, materials, thoughts, situations, and occasions for learning" (p. 102). The Reggio Emilia approach advocates that teachers pay close attention to the myriad of ways the classroom space invites learning experiences and interactions. Education in Reggio Emilia is the sole responsibility of parents and teachers. However, the Reggio approach identifies a "third teacher," the environment (Gandini, 1998). The organization of the physical environment is crucial in Reggio Emilia's early childhood program. The educators in Reggio schools are concerned about what their school environments are teaching children (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007).

The physical environment in Reggio schools creates many opportunities for children and adults to interact, cultivating a community atmosphere. Each individual classroom opens to a center *piazza*, a large public space common in Italian schools. Classrooms are surrounded by glass windows so that activities are always observable; and each classroom also has access to the surrounding community through courtyards and doors to the outside. Communal spaces such as lunchrooms, kitchens, bathrooms, and playrooms are designed to encourage playful encounters. For example, dress-up clothes are housed in a central

space of the school so that children from different classrooms can assist their peers with buttons, zippers, and play together. Bathrooms, important spaces for social exchange, are decorated with mobiles, paintings, and colorful arrangements of towels and toothbrushes. In addition to promoting interaction and community, Reggio environments also contain multiple mirrors and reflective surfaces that constantly invite children to interact with themselves (New, 1990; 1993; 1997).

Malaguzzi used the marketplace as a metaphor to solidify his vision for classroom design: “Customers look for the wares that interest them, make selections, and engage in lively interactions” (Malaguzzi, cited in Gandini, 1998, p. 173). The marketplace metaphor exemplifies the level of interactivity that is present within Reggio classroom spaces. Strong-Wilson & Ellis (2007) suggested that Reggio teachers may place paint easels close to natural sunlight or introduce environmental provocations meant to surprise children and spark discussion, like a pizza box in the kitchen corner, paper and pencils in the “blocks” center, or aromatic scents to tantalize the children’s noses when they first enter the classroom. Reggio teachers also bring in realistic objects for children to use in their play, such as different colors and shapes of pasta located in the house corner and store colorful objects in transparent containers (markers, buttons, fabrics, wrapping paper), which children can help sort by color or texture, piquing their curiosity and enriching their imagination with the environment and its materials.

Fraser (2006) identified some Reggio principles that are key to the environment as children’s third teacher, such as: aesthetics, transparency, active learning, flexibility, and bridging the gap between the indoors and outdoors. Aesthetics and transparency relate to how children draw their attention to anything that awakens their senses. New (2007)

expressed that Reggio classrooms place an emphasis on the aesthetic sensibility of environments, which reflects the importance of design and detail evident in Italian homes and businesses. Reggio classrooms are sparkling clean, plants and natural light are in abundance, and found objects such as rose petals and colored stones are aesthetically placed. Teachers want children to learn to notice and value the colors, textures, and designs in their environment. According to Fraser, the principle of flexibility refers to how children will often use objects in their play in alternative ways not explicitly intended by adults or the curriculum. Active learning articulates how children learn through direct, hands-on experimentation with objects in their environment. The principle of bridging the gap between the indoors and outdoors is explored in Wein's (2008) personal account of her experience at the Reggio Diana school.

Out on the playground of the Diana school, Wein observed a large, low table that immediately caught her eye. The table was beautifully arranged, containing a bouquet of poppies and May wildflowers. The arrangement also included a wide range of natural plant items such as seeds, tiny grasses, leaves, and pink and magenta orange peels organized in transparent containers. The outdoor provocation bridged the gap between indoors and outdoors as contents from the outdoors were mediated by teacher organization and made into an outdoor, stimulated classroom space. Wein observed a little girl pick up a poppy bud and spread the bud open across the table. She watched as an adult visitor added pink petals to the child's dispersed bud and began making collages with the natural materials together, smiling, gesturing, and reacting to each other's material arrangements. Wein expressed that even though she could not speak Italian, it did not matter as the organization of the outdoor environment facilitated the adult-child interactions forward.

Wein's account is an example of how the Reggio environment serves as the "third teacher." The beautifully arranged outdoor environment invited children and foreign visitors into prolonged engagements and fruitful play experiences using natural materials.

Tarr (2001) discussed how typical North American early childhood classrooms often contain prefabricated, commercial images with brightly colored bulletin boards backed with colored papers and surrounded by scalloped decorative borders. Young children are bombarded with stereotypical posters that are plastered around the classroom walls depicting flat, black outlined "cartoon-like" figures, and an abundance of commercial charts that depict the alphabet, colors, shapes, and numbers. These stereotyped posters and bulletin boards talk down to children and silence their voices and abilities to respond to their environment in authentic ways.

In contrast to U.S. classrooms, the Italian Reggio Emilia early childhood classrooms inform children of their "rights" as competent beings. According to Tarr (2001) one will not find the commercial displays that are commonplace in North American early childhood classrooms in Reggio Emilia. Classroom walls in Reggio schools powerfully reflect the raw work and words of the children. Photographs and children's work accompanied by transcriptions of their discussions are highly visible within the classroom space. Walls surrounding Reggio schools serve as a canvas for children to tell their stories and to represent the emerging ideas of their environment. By displaying the work and words of children along Reggio walls this communicates clearly to the children that adults genuinely respect their ideas. Kang (2007) stated that her first impression of the Balducci preschool in Reggio Emilia resembled an art or children's museum. She documented that the children's works and even the works of adults were displayed on walls, hung from the

ceilings, and placed in every corner of the school. Such displays convey the interconnection between the environment and the curriculum in a manner that keeps families informed about and interested in children's school activities (New, 1990).



*Photos from New (1990)*

Considering the environment as a child's "third teacher" reflects the child-centered atmosphere of the Reggio emergent curriculum. The organization of classroom space and how it invites student interactions fosters children's appreciation for their community. The aesthetic sensibility of Reggio environments places the child in the position to enhance their perceptual awareness; and provides spaces for wonder, curiosity, and the expression of ideas. U.S. early childhood educators can enhance their "third teacher" by carefully designing and considering all aspects of the classroom environment for their educational potential to enrich children's learning. Tarr (2001) suggests that educators consider displaying authentic student work to respect children's voices instead of silencing them with commercialized posters.

### **Critical Analysis of the Reggio Emilia Approach**

In this section, I will take a critical look at the Reggio approach and analyze its philosophy for its strengths, points of consideration for implementation in U.S. public schools, and discuss how the Reggio emergent curriculum can be assimilated into standards-based education.

**Strengths: DAP.** The Reggio Emilia approach embodies holistic, integrated, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) that has play at its core. Decades of research evidence shows that play supports learning across all domains of children's development and is the most effective way children learn (Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2014). Malaguzzi (1993) promoted play as the principle means for which children learn. Reggio children play through their symbolic languages not only in the graphic arts, but also drama,



music, dance, movement, and all forms of constructive play. The Reggio emergent curriculum is play-generated where children's autonomy and interests are readily supported for the basis of project work. The Reggio approach encourages children to use various media to construct meaning of their physical and social worlds. This approach embodies the developmentally appropriate practice (New, 1993).

***Theory to Practice.*** According to Staley (1998) the Reggio approach best reflects the theoretical beliefs of how young children develop and learn. Loris Malaguzzi founded the Reggio schools within the context of educational theorists Piaget and Vygotsky. Malaguzzi's belief in an "active education" resonates with the views of Piaget. This Piagetian belief is exemplified through the way children in Reggio schools self-direct their learning and manipulate objects within their environment to construct knowledge (Hewett, 2001). Likewise, Malaguzzi's philosophy for an "education based on relationships" is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which is based on the belief that children best acquire knowledge through their social interactions.

***Authentic VS. Standardized Assessment.*** Another strength of the Reggio approach is its process of assessing students in ways other than standardized tests and grades. Teachers in the U.S. are increasingly required to subject children to standardized tests. "Unreliable standardized testing undermines learning and damages young children's healthy development" (Miller & Almond, 2009, p. 16). The parents in Reggio Emilia receive more substantive feedback on student performance by receiving on-going detailed information about their children's daily activities and progress. According to Hertzog (2001), Reggio teachers keep a daily journal in which they communicate to parents how

their children spent their day. The journal includes a diagram depicting areas of the classroom where children spent most of their time and a brief text reflecting what specific topics children were speaking about during the day. Children's individual and group work may be displayed in portfolios or sent home throughout the school year. In addition to journals and portfolios, parents also share in their child's culminating productions or performances, providing them with authentic experiences to witness their child's skills and abilities come to life.

The process of documentation discussed earlier in this paper also serves as a valuable authentic assessment measure. U.S. early childhood educators could use Reggio-inspired documentation formats. For example, if a teacher wants to highlight for families and administrators how their class is meeting a particular math or science standard, teachers may use photos of children participating in such experiences, student work samples, and transcriptions of children's comments that align with a specific standard (Seitz, 2008). Documentation can help U.S. educators assess children's progress in meeting learning goals on a daily basis rather than summatively each quarter.

### ***Points of Consideration for Implementation of the Reggio Approach***

***A Belief, Not a Curriculum.*** Unlike formal educational models such as Waldorf and Montessori, which have defined methods, teacher certification standards, and accreditation processes, the Reggio Emilia approach is neither a model nor recipe with set guidelines or procedures (Edwards, 2002). The North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (2014) stresses that the Reggio philosophy is not a set curriculum or recipe to follow; instead, it is "a deep knowledge in theory and community-constructed values that have been and are

continuously being translated into high quality early childhood practices.” Hewett (2001) advises U.S. early childhood educators that one cannot simply import Italy’s Reggio Emilia’s unique way of educating children; their philosophies and beliefs are ones that are deeply ingrained and strongly influenced by its surrounding culture. Gardner (2013) believed that we just can’t transplant the Reggio Emilia approach to American soil; we have to reinvent it, figure out which are the most important aspects and then make those aspects thrive within our own culture. U.S. early childhood educators can learn a great deal from the Reggio Emilia approach. We can consider how to transform our schools in order to develop a genuine respect for children and their “rights” as competent, curious, and creative constructors of knowledge.

***Interview with an American Reggio Teacher.*** To get a firsthand perspective of the Reggio approach, I spoke with Ms. Blake, a teacher who works at a Reggio-inspired preschool in the San Francisco Bay Area to understand the pros and cons of the Reggio emergent curriculum. She spoke of the considerable flexibility given to both teachers and students in designing curriculum projects. She enjoys the open-endedness of the emergent curriculum which permits children to investigate their own questions and choose from a variety of media to represent their learning. A notable advantage Ms. Blake mentioned was her school’s teacher-child ratio; for every six students, there is one teacher.

In traditional Reggio Emilia schools, the average teacher-child ratio is 1:11 (Edwards et al., 1998). In U.S. public schools, grades kindergarten through second grade, one will often see a 1:22 ratio (SFUSD, 2014). Each preschool in Reggio Emilia is staffed with two *pedagogistas* or curriculum specialist per classroom, one *atelierista* or art teacher,

and several auxiliary staff (New, 1993 & see **Table 1.1** from Edwards et al., 1998). In Reggio Emilia, the majority of work is done in small-groups. Teachers guide each small-group in their own unique projects of interest. This could be a challenging although not impossible feat to accomplish in a U.S. classroom of twenty students with just one teacher. The Reggio practice of project work would have to be reinvented and adapted for the U.S. public school system. This does not mean limiting small-group work or implementing a predetermined curriculum for all. Teachers can still uphold the Reggio philosophy of viewing all children as competent, creative, active constructors of knowledge. Long-term, theme-based, open-ended curriculum projects could be implemented that enable all children the flexibility to investigate project topics that are relevant to their lives and contribute to an integrated curriculum. Projects should maximize the potential for children to create meaning with a wide variety of artistic, expressive, symbolic languages. Local schools in the San Francisco Bay Area such as McNear Elementary and the Creative Arts Charter School already successfully execute Reggio-inspired project work with their students. To expand this to conventional classrooms takes careful preparation, creativity, and parent/community involvement.

**Table 1.1****TABLE 1.1. Schedules and Staffing of the Preprimary Schools in Reggio Emilia**

Typical preprimary school composition	
Classrooms	3
Children	75
Teachers	6
<i>Altlierista</i>	1
Cook	1
Auxiliary Staff	4

Typical children's annual calendar		Typical staff's annual calendar	
Opening	September 1	First day of service	Aug. 23
Closing	June 30	Last day of service	Jul. 5

Summer service	Hours open
One preprimary school is open during the month of July.	Monday to Friday 8 a.m.–4 p.m. Extended day service: 7:30–8:00 a.m. & 4:00–6:20 p.m.

Staff's daily schedule		Staff's weekly meetings	
1st shift teacher	8:00 a.m.–1:48 p.m.	36 hours a week of which:	
2nd shift teacher	8:27 a.m.–4:00 p.m.	30 hours spent with children	
<i>Altlierista</i>	8:30 a.m.–3:33 p.m.	4½ hours for meetings, planning, and inservice training	
Cook	7:45 a.m.–2:54 p.m.	1½ hours for documentation and analysis	
1st auxiliary staff	8:30 a.m.–4:03 p.m.		
2nd auxiliary staff	9:00 a.m.–4:03 p.m.		
Others	12:30 p.m.–6:54 p.m.		

Adapted from: "An Historical Outline, Data, and Information," page 21, published by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Department of Education, 1996. Reprinted by permission.

Ms. Blake also expressed how the Reggio approach is labor intensive. As noted in the Reggio schools, teachers are required to complete an extensive amount of documentation, frequently rearrange the classroom environment, and plan curriculum based on children's constantly emerging questions and interests. Another challenge Ms. Blake mentioned was the high cost materials involved in implementing art-based project work at her school. Bearing in mind that original Italian Reggio Emilia schools are rich in resources obtained from *Remedia* or recycling centers and continual family and community support who donate and/purchase materials as needed.

U.S. early childhood educators on a limited budget can be creative in developing a material-rich classroom environment. Everyday objects such as cardboard boxes, wire, and mirrors can be used in addition to traditional art materials (i.e.: paint, crayons, markers) for art-based projects. Natural materials can be integrated such as dried leaves, twigs, rocks, pine cones, and clay in an effort to introduce new artmaking experiences. Educators should remember that implementing Reggio-inspired projects involve the use of “little money and a lot of fantasy” (New, 1990, p. 6).

***Parent and Community Involvement.*** The Reggio philosophy of parent involvement is key to the successful implementation of the Reggio approach in America. However, there are some cultural and educational differences between the U.S. and Italy when it comes to parent and community involvement. Reggio Emilia’s tradition of community collaboration is a result of Italy’s historical and cultural view of children as the collective responsibility of the state (New, 2007). The infant/toddler and preprimary programs are a vital part of the community, as reflected in the high level of financial support. The tax-payers in Reggio Emilia pay a reported \$69 to \$269 per month, depending on their income and the age of their child (Newsweek, 2010). New (1993) explained that parents are expected to take part in discussions about school policy, child development concerns, and curriculum planning and evaluation. These meetings are usually held in the evenings so that the majority of working parents can participate. This is in stark contrast to the U.S., where parents struggle for their voices to be heard and acknowledged by local school boards (Spring, 2013). Unlike in the U.S. where students are introduced to a new teacher each year, Reggio teachers keep the same group of children together for a period of three years (New, 1990), which facilitates a strong sense of community as teachers are able

to build long-lasting relationships and collaboration between students and their parents.

U.S. educators and administrators can support the type of collaboration evident in Reggio schools by including parents in the process of school-wide decision-making, curriculum planning, and instructional practices. Reggio-inspired documentation practices can be introduced so that children's learning experiences are visible, which potentially could inspire parents to take more active roles in their child's future curricular activities.

***The Child and the Standards.*** A final point of consideration for the implementation of the Reggio approach is to view it in the context of U.S. standards-based education. In Reggio Emilia, teachers have a great deal of autonomy which is evident by the absence of teacher manuals, curriculum guides, explicit academic standards or achievement tests. The lack of externally imposed mandates encourages Reggio teachers to become skilled observers of their children in order to develop their curriculum and instruction. Any school-wide mandates in Reggio Emilia come directly from the teachers and the parents. There are no principals in Reggio schools or hierarchical relationships among the teachers. The administration of the Reggio Emilia early childhood system is representative of other Italian community-based programs. A head administrator reports directly to the town council and works with a group of *pedagogistas* or curriculum team leaders from each school. The parents of Reggio Emilia are always invited to take part in teacher-administrator meetings. The power and flexibility that is given to the teachers and parents in curriculum and administration in Reggio Emilia is profound, unlike the top-down, administration-driven education that is present in American schools (New, 1990; 1993).

The preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia do not place an emphasis on “college and career readiness,” in contrast to the more academic focused and less developmentally appropriate U.S. kindergartens for 5 and 6 year olds (Tarr, 2001). U.S. classroom schedules tend to be tightly planned and directed toward behavioral objectives, it is typically a linear, one way path to learning where teachers talk and children listen. Very often, emergent curriculum, child-centered practices do not fit into this top-down approach to U.S. education (Jones, 2012). The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act dramatically increased standardized testing and sparked an overwhelming academic “pushdown,” decreasing time for play in preschools and kindergartens. Instead of planning a developmentally appropriate curriculum that is of interest to the children, early childhood teachers have been forced to implement a prescriptive daily schedule leaving little time for play (Miller & Almond, 2009). In a visit to an Italian Reggio school, Hertzog (2001) did not see schedules posted on any of the classroom walls. Hertzog stated that the children’s school day consisted of group meetings as well as multiple work and play periods. In Reggio Emilia, children are not rushed to complete projects; they are allowed sufficient time to explore and naturally investigate many academic topics within their work and play periods.

According to Hoorn et al. (2014) many teachers who have adopted Reggio emergent curriculum practices have found that the knowledge and competencies set out in a standards-based curriculum can be readily achieved through Reggio-inspired project work. Reggio Emilia teachers foster an integrated curriculum and have broad curriculum goals in mind, but also follow the lead and interests of the children. The teachers are experts at keeping in mind the “big ideas” in language, mathematics, science, and social studies as they plan and develop emergent curriculum (Schiller, 1995). Children in Reggio Emilia



schools learn key skills of literacy, numeracy, science and social problem solving through shared exploration of virtually any topic. The Reggio emergent curriculum does not divide up the day into tightly scheduled slots of literacy, math, music, P.E., art, and so forth; instead, they naturally integrate all content areas through real-life applications during project work (Hertzog, 2001). Reggio educators understand that children do not have “math,” “literacy,” or “social studies” experiences. They utilize a broad range of knowledge and skills from many disciplines (Bickart, Jablon, & Dodge, 1999). The problems that children pose during emergent project work makes learning academic skills no longer abstract, isolated concepts, but real-life situations that are full of meaning and highly interesting (Rabitti, 1994). The many “languages” that Reggio children use to construct knowledge of their world have the ability to make learning any topic concrete and comprehensible.

U.S. early childhood educators could implement Reggio-inspired project work while still addressing state standards. Educators can selectively choose children’s emerging topics of interest and find ways to integrate them within science or social studies curriculum projects. Developing an integrated curriculum can help teachers effectively address a range of state standards and children’s interests within an interesting context (Bickart et al., 1999).

### **What would the Late Maria Montessori, John Dewey, and William Doll Say about the Reggio Emilia Approach?**

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education is placed on the theoretical landscape of progressive education. This approach reflects essential progressive philosophies such as its focus on children as active, social learners and its curriculum based on the interests, needs, and growth of the children (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2012). I selected three progressive curriculum theorists, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, and William Doll to critique the Reggio Emilia approach from different perspectives within the realm of progressive ideals.

**Montessori.** Maria Montessori was an Italian educator and physician who opened her first school Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) in Rome in 1907 for children ages 4 through 7. Montessori developed a comprehensive, child-centered educational philosophy which translated into a concrete, pedagogical method (Edwards, 2002).

As in the Reggio Emilia approach, the act of observation was an important part of Montessori's philosophy (Humphryes, 1998). "From the child itself he will learn how to perfect himself as an educator" (Montessori, 2013, p. 24). Montessori believed that by closely observing children and having direct knowledge of the child was essential in understanding what they are ready to learn next (Edwards, 2002). Montessori's continual assessment of children's abilities led her to design a wide range of didactic materials from which children learned (Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008).

Montessori designed her materials to attract children's interest and to present information in steps that progressed from simple to complex and from concrete to abstract. Montessori's materials were designed with what she referred to as "control of error" – a self-corrective element that allows the child to find the answer without adults having to point out their mistakes. To illustrate Montessori's "control of error" concept, let's take the traditional Montessori material, the cylinder block, a block of wood with ten holes of varying diameters. This material is used to didactically teach children about mathematical spatial relationships. In each hole there is a removable cylinder with a knob glued to one end to assist the child in lifting them in and out of the block, similar to puzzle pieces. When all ten cylinders are taken out of the block, the child must put them back inside the correct sized holes. If the child inserts a thin cylinder into a wider hole, this will result in the child having a thick cylinder remaining that doesn't seem to fit anywhere. The cylinder block material is an example of Montessori's "control of error" concept as the material didactically encourages the child to critically think, correct their own mistakes, and figure out where the cylinder fits best (Humphryes, 1998).

In the Reggio approach however, materials are not so didactic in nature. In Reggio Emilia, children are viewed as competent learners who are permitted the freedom to construct knowledge using open-ended unstructured materials (Dibello & Ashelman, 2011). While Montessori would admire the way Reggio teachers design educational experiences based on their observation of children's interaction with materials, Montessori would say that materials Reggio schools make available need to be more purposeful and didactic. In Montessori education, lessons are given based upon when children are developmentally ready for new concepts, a judgment made by careful teacher observation of children using

specially designed instructional materials (Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008). Montessori materials are specifically used to teach children in the areas of practical life, sensorial, mathematics, language, science, geography, art and music (Edwards, 2002). This is in contrast to the Reggio approach, which believes in allowing children to “listen to materials” and find the purpose within each material to construct knowledge about topics that interest them (Tarr, 2008).

The Montessori curriculum is highly individualized with most of the children engaging in structured, independent work using didactic materials (Lillard, 2013). The Reggio philosophy’s emphasis on small group and cooperative learning would conflict with the views of Montessori, but resonate with another progressive philosopher, John Dewey.

**Dewey.** John Dewey, the father of the Progressive Education Movement, advocated that school and curriculum should reflect living and participating in a democratic community (Flinders & Thornton, 2013, p. 7). In Dewey’s book, *Democracy and Education*, he claimed that school should be a miniature democratic society, in which students could learn and practice the skills needed for democratic living.

The Reggio Emilia approach has strong ties with the progressive philosophies of Dewey. Loris Malaguzzi, the guiding visionary of the Reggio Emilia approach, believed that “the school by principle is open and democratic” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10) and advocated for children, teachers, and parents to be placed at the center of education. Parents established the Reggio schools with a declared desire for young children to acquire the skills necessary to live in a democratic and free society (New, 2007). Dewey would praise the intimate involvement of parents and community members in Reggio Emilia. The active and

participatory role of parents in Reggio schools reflects Dewey's ideal that school life should grow out of children's home life (Dewey, 2013). Families are seen as partners in Reggio Emilia's early childhood schools. This trait expands upon Italian culture's emphasis of shared governance and the long-standing traditions of collaboration between small businesses and farmers in the town of Reggio Emilia (New, 2007). The rich cultural traditions of collaboration in Reggio schools reflect Dewey's belief that the community's duty to education is of paramount moral importance (Dewey, 2013).

Malaguzzi (1993) advocated for an education based on social relationships which would resonate with Dewey's belief that true education encourages a child to act as a "member of a unity" (Dewey, 2013, p. 33) and that a child's powers are stimulated by the demand of their social situations. Dewey believed that education in his time neglected the fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. Malaguzzi emphasized his belief in community life by advocating that the majority of children's work be completed in small groups. Malaguzzi (1993) considered small groups to be the most favorable type of classroom organization. In the eyes of Malaguzzi, groups allow for efficient communication and complex interactions that enhance children's learning and development. Dewey would agree with Malaguzzi's philosophy for an education based upon social relationships. Dewey believed that school should be an institution that simplified existing social life (Dewey, 2013). He believed that if we eliminate the social factor from the lives of children, we may be left with "an inert lifeless mass" (Dewey, 2013, p. 34). Malaguzzi believed that through social interactions, children enhance their interpersonal relationships with both peers and adults and advance each other's intellectual growth for the greater good of society.

Like Dewey, Malaguzzi considered the teacher as a guide who directs children's learning toward worthwhile goals. Basing curriculum on children's interests is a central tenet of the Reggio emergent curriculum. In Reggio schools, teachers discover how children participate, choose, and proceed through their social interactions (Malaguzzi, 1993). From their observations, teachers record, analyze, and debate their emerging understandings of children's ways of thinking and learning, then share these understandings with others. These child-focused social exchanges among teachers serve as the foundation for emergent curriculum that is based on the interests of the children (New, 2007). Dewey (1963) uses the analogy of steering a boat that directly conceptualizes the role of the teacher in the Reggio emergent curriculum: "The teacher is a guide and director; he steers the boat, but the energy that propels it must come from those who are learning" (Dewey, 1963, p. 36). In the Reggio emergent curriculum, it is the teacher who plans curriculum, but it's the children's interests and desires which propels the curriculum onward. The Reggio belief that teaching should be based on children's direct experiences and interests would resonate with Dewey's belief that the teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or habits of mind in the child. Instead, the teacher should be looked at as a member of the community who selects the influences that assist children in their proper development (Dewey, 2013).

**Doll.** William Doll is a postmodern curriculum theorist who shares many progressivist education ideals that resonate with the likes of John Dewey. Doll (2012) discussed the topic of control in relation to curriculum development. He wondered if there was a way to still maintain control in the classroom, but without dominating influence over

students' natural impulses to learn. Doll would be intrigued by the Reggio emergent curriculum and its philosophy on viewing the teachers and children as partners in learning. Doll called the concept of control the "ghost in the curriculum" (Doll, 2012, p. 115) as the amount of centralized control exerted over students could result in making classrooms not conducive to deep and meaningful learning. "Expecting the unexpected" is a favorite Reggio Emilia saying (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007, p. 3) which is an integral philosophy of the Reggio emergent curriculum. With no predetermined lessons in Reggio Emilia schools (Wright, 1997), both the teachers and children exercise joint control over curriculum planning. Gandini & Rinaldi (1998) claim that despite the fact Reggio teachers discuss all the possible ways that a project could evolve, at times, it is possible that neither the teachers nor students really know what directions their projects may lead them. Planning without preconceived objectives is a distinct trait of the Reggio emergent curriculum. By preparing for the possible directions of a project, Reggio teachers leave ample latitude for changes, unexpected moments, and digressions that could occur. Planning in the Reggio emergent curriculum is ongoing and it is impossible to separate what the teacher does beforehand from what actually takes place as children's projects progress.

In a sense, Doll would view the Reggio emergent curriculum as a form of control that is noncentralized, a sense of control that is equally distributed and based on "just the right amount of disturbance" (Doll, 2012, p. 115). Reggio teachers exercise control over a project as they guide children's learning and ideas, but a curricular "disturbance" is always around the corner, as teachers acknowledge children's unexpected hypotheses, questions, and choices and then seek to incorporate them into future curriculum activities. Reggio emergent project work operates within this unique equal distribution of control.

According to Gandini (2009) teachers do not exert coercive control over the children, but are equal participants, learning alongside the children. Doll's reasoning is reminiscent of Malaguzzi's "education based on relationships." In Reggio Emilia, lessons are nonlinear and recursive which resonates with Doll's belief that curriculum should be constructed as a result of group interactions (Doll, 2012).

### Conclusion

The progressive roots of Reggio Emilia and its child-centered emergent curriculum approach may seem like a radical vision at a time when external forces are supporting skill-driven literacy and math curricula, and extensive accountability through achievement testing. Instead of taking up curriculum in a linear, fragmented way, Reggio teachers guide children through projects that arise from their interests in a fluid and much more natural way. The Reggio emergent curriculum allows children the time to experience, explore, and discover. A teacher who implemented a Reggio-inspired project once said, "the project gave us an appreciation in slowing down and doing less to accomplish more" (Wein, 2008, p. 49). The Reggio approach emphasizes developmentally appropriate practice and fosters the essential "21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills" (P21, 2014) young children need in a changing global society. Through the Reggio emergent curriculum, **collaboration** and **communication** are critical. Young children in Reggio Emilia are educated within a philosophy based on relationships and collaborative inquiry between their peers, teachers, parents, and community members. Children spend a significant amount of time in small groups communicating with others about their work and sharing their experiences to gain different perspectives and deeper understandings. Teachers join in these lively group



conversations as co-learners and record what children say to reflect back on later and develop future instruction.

**Creativity** and **critical thinking** are crucial. Children use materials as “symbolic languages” not just for communication purposes, but also for making thinking processes visible to peers, teachers, and parents (Tarr, 2008). Atelierista, Vecchi (1998) at the Reggio Emilia Diana School expressed that creativity is part of the makeup of every individual. Through the Reggio approach, emergent curriculum is built on children’s curiosities and imaginations. Children as young as four and five years old apply their creative thinking through hands-on work that combines science, math, technology, art and language in an interwoven integrated curriculum (Duddy, 2014). Vecchi believed that young children utilize the symbolic languages to critically think and reflect on reality both individually and collectively from the experiences they are living. Children’s languages allow them to construct theories that are not arbitrary or artificially imposed upon them. The Reggio Emilia approach permits children the freedom to draw on their own conclusions, discover things on their own, and become “authors of their own learning” (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 4).

The Reggio emergent curriculum is illustrative of how U.S. education might best respond to children’s development in an age of top-down, standards-based education that seeks to silence the “spirit” of the child; their precious thoughts, dreams, desires, and interests. Malaguzzi (1994) urged educators to see themselves as researchers able to produce a true curriculum, a curriculum generated from all of the children. Malaguzzi warned educators of the dangers of moving in the direction of a heavily regimented standards-based education. Malaguzzi hints at these dangers in his billiards analogy:

School is not at all like billiards. When you play billiards you push the ball with a certain force and it hits the table and bounces off; there’s a definite way the ball will go, depending on force

and direction. Children are not at all like this, predictable. But sometimes schools function as if they were; these are schools with no joy (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 2).

Malaguzzi (1994) advocated that children have a right to a good school, good teachers, good activities, and the right to imagine. Malaguzzi believed that we need to give children full rights of citizenship in life and society. In a time where teachers are preparing children for Common Core aligned tests and “college and career readiness,” we need to heed Malaguzzi’s advice and cherish in our hearts the image of a child who is beautiful, powerful, competent, creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires (Malaguzzi, 1994). These images of children can only be fostered by nurturing teachers, not the standards.

For U.S. early educators wanting to implement the Reggio approach, suggested ways include: involve colleagues, parents, and community members, integrate a variety of natural and recyclable materials into the classroom, begin with short-term projects within broad, relevant topics that allow children to explore many smaller topics in groups (Bickart et al., 1999), and most importantly, *listen* to children and document their ideas, questions, and interests in curriculum development (Staley, 1998).

If we consider nothing else from the Reggio Emilia approach, we should embrace Malaguzzi’s focus on relationships and learning. We should come together as a community and create ways to provide our young children with a more meaningful and enriching education. As Malaguzzi (1994) so eloquently stated, “We have to find each other in the forest and begin to discuss what the education of the child actually means. The important aspect is not just to promote the education of the child but the health and happiness of the child as well” (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 2).

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