

## The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Years Education

### BACKGROUND

In educational terms the northern Italian town of Reggio Emilia has a firmly established worldwide reputation for forward thinking and excellence in its approach to early childhood education. North American and Scandinavian educators have long recognised the importance of the continuing educational development that is taking place in the Reggio model, and there is much about the approach that is of interest to educators in Australia.

It is a socio-constructivist model. That is, it is influenced by the theory of Lev Vygotsky, which states that children (and adults) co-construct their theories and knowledge through the relationships that they build with other people and the surrounding environment. It also draws on the work of others such as Jean Piaget, Howard Gardner and Jerome Bruner. It promotes an image of the child as a strong, capable protagonist in his or her own learning, and, importantly, as a subject of rights.

It is distinguished by a deeply embedded commitment to the role of research in learning and teaching. It is an approach where the expressive arts play a central role in learning and where a unique reciprocal learning relationship exists between teacher and child. Much attention is given to detailed observation and documentation of learning and the learning process takes priority over the final product. It is a model that demonstrates a strong relationship between early childhood services and schools and community and provides a remarkable programme for professional development.



In terms of staffing, each centre comprises two teachers per classroom, one atelierista (a specialist arts teacher who works closely with teachers on all areas of learning, teaching and documentation), a cook and several auxiliary staff – kitchen assistants and cleaners – who are all equally valued as playing fundamental roles in the life of the centre. There is no principal of the centre and no promoted staff structure. Teachers work in pairs and remain with the same group of children for the three-year period, developing a strong sense of community.

The organisation of the centres is as follows. Teaching staff work a total of 36 hours per week, of which 30 hours are spent with the children. The remaining six hours are used for a variety of purposes, including professional development, planning, preparation of materials and meetings with families. Teachers work on a shift system that rotates weekly. The schools are open from 8.00 a.m. until 4.00 p.m. daily with the option of a 7.30 a.m. start and an extended day until 6.20 p.m. for those families who file a special request. As well as two full-time teachers in each section there is

also a part-time teacher who covers the extended day and works from 3.30 p.m. until 6.30 p.m. Teachers always work in pairs and each pair of teachers (co-teachers) is responsible for a maximum of 24 children at nursery school level. In Reggio, nursery education is regarded as multi-functional, providing high-quality education and childcare for the children of people who work. Most educational activities take place in the morning.



Children have lunch together and then spend part of the afternoon asleep. As no hierarchy exists within the school staff, teachers are involved in all aspects of the daily routine including meal times and bed times; emphasising the ethos of collectivity and participation that pervades all areas of school life.

### **WHAT IS THE 'REGGIO APPROACH'?**

The following factors are inherent in the Reggio Approach:

- the image of the child
- the expressive arts in the pre-school establishment
- progettazione –the program – the projects
- community and parent–school relationships
- environment
- teachers as learners.

Each of these will be considered separately, although they are generally interrelated.

### **The Image of the Child**

*“Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not only see them as engaged in action with objects, does not emphasise only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the reflective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and children”.*

*Loris Malaguzzi*

All that takes place within the Reggio schools in terms of learning and teaching, building relationships and professional development stems from one overriding factor – the image of the child. Rather than seeing the child as an empty vessel waiting eagerly to be filled with knowledge, Reggio educators believe strongly in a child with unlimited potential who is eager to interact with and contribute to the world. They believe in a child who has a fundamental right to ‘realise and expand their potential’. This is a child who is driven by curiosity and imagination, a capable child who delights in taking responsibility for his or her own learning, a child who listens and is listened to, a child with an enormous need to love and to be loved, a child who is valued. Indeed the way in which children’s many strengths and abilities are valued and ‘listened to’ is fundamental to this approach.

While international visitors so often concentrate on the graphic and visual aspects of children's work, the words and conversations of the children demonstrate capacities to reflect and make hypotheses on very complex and often abstract thoughts and ideas, when given the time and emotional space to do so. Fundamentally, then, this is an image of a child who is a subject of rights. This is highlighted in the creation of a 'Charter of Rights', a manifesto of the rights of parents and teachers as well as children, which is evident in every school. It states that: Children have the right to be recognised as subjects of individual, legal, civil, and social rights; as both source and constructors of their own experience, and thus active participants in the organisation of their identities, abilities, and autonomy, through relationships and interaction with their peers, with adults, with ideas, with objects and with the real and imaginary events of intercommunicating worlds.

By valuing children in this way educators put much more emphasis on really listening to children. Indeed, the pedagogical basis of the whole Reggio approach has been called the pedagogy of listening – listening being a metaphor for the educators' attempt to gain as real an understanding as possible of children and their learning processes. When our youngest children are literally listened to and given the time and space to express themselves we are faced with children capable of doing so in a much more complex and abstract way than children are generally given credit for. This is something that is revealed in the Reggio schools through the transcriptions of children's in-depth conversations at a daily level.



Unlike other pedagogies that can be guilty of treating early infancy as a preparation for later childhood and adulthood, and consequently seeing nursery education as a kind of antechamber to later stages of formal education, the Reggio Approach considers early infancy to be a distinct developmental phase in which children demonstrate an extraordinary curiosity about the world. Indeed, the name of the schools, scuole dell'infanzia (schools of early childhood), does not have the connotations of 'preparation' and 'pre-ness' inherent in the Anglo-American term 'pre-school'. This image of the child has a fundamental and far-reaching effect on the learning and teaching that takes place in the schools.

### **The Expressive Arts in the Pre-school: 'The Hundred Languages'**

*The child  
 is made of one hundred.  
 The child has  
 a hundred languages  
 a hundred hands  
 a hundred thoughts  
 a hundred ways of thinking  
 of playing, of speaking ...*  
 Loris Malaguzzi

One of the most interesting elements within the Reggio Approach is the central importance given to the expressive arts as a vehicle for learning. Detailed drawing activities are a daily occurrence in the schools and the outstanding standard of work produced by the children has become widely acknowledged. Children are also encouraged to participate in a variety of expressive activities such as sculpture, dramatic play, shadow play, puppetry, painting, dancing, music, ceramics, construction and writing. The plethora of resources in the schools' central atelier and the mini atelier in each classroom, as well as the presence of a full-time atelierista in each pre-school establishment, is testimony to the importance placed on this area of child development. Certain topics such as 'light and dark' recur as stimuli for children's learning, and teachers and children have a wide variety of material and resources at their disposal.

For such a theme children may be given the opportunity to explore the effects of light and shadow using torches and light tables. They may have the opportunity to draw with light by making holes in black card that is lit from behind; they may be given the opportunity to create shadow stories using objects on an overhead projector, stories in which they themselves can physically become a part.



Over the years, visitors from other countries have occasionally questioned the concentration on the graphic languages over other subjects, for example music or expressive movement. It is undoubtedly true that the startling detail and expressiveness in children's drawings is a distinctive feature of the approach but it has never been considered the most important. In recent years there has been a tangible evolution in the development of other expressive languages with children. This can be seen clearly in children's work on many different projects such as the work on expressive movement done at the Choreia pre-school establishment in conjunction with the Aterballetto dance company and the outstanding exhibition of children's work Dialoghi con i luoghi which is currently on show in the new International Centre of Childhood. In

recent years new atelieristas entering the schools have brought new and different skills with them; there are now atelierista who are dance or music specialists and this will undoubtedly have an impact on the way in which the expressive arts develops in these schools.

### **Why stress the expressive arts over literacy and numeracy?**

Consistent with the work on multiple intelligences by American psychologist Howard Gardner, educators in Reggio Emilia are fully aware of the importance of developing all areas of learning and understanding, not only the logical and linguistic. While literacy and numeracy activities undoubtedly have their place in the daily activities of the pre-school establishments, teachers believe strongly in the central role that the expressive arts have to play, for many reasons.

- They acknowledge the fact that very young children are extremely expressive, with an enormous capacity for sharing feelings and emotion, and that imagination plays a key role in the child's search for knowledge and understanding.

- They are convinced of the overriding importance of the learning process rather than the final product. Involvement in the expressive arts allows the children to revisit subjects of interest over and over again through many different media to gain multiple perspectives and a higher level of understanding.
- They are aware that, by concentrating too much on the development of the child's verbal and literary skills, teachers can covertly devalue the child's skilled use of their many nonverbal languages (Malaguzzi talked of a hundred and a hundred more). The child's capacity to communicate through gestures, glances, emotion, dance, music, sculpture, painting, story telling, scribed stories and many more is therefore greatly valued, and teachers strive to develop these in the child.
- They believe strongly that the expressive arts can give children the opportunity to look at and experience their world in many different ways. The children are encouraged to use all their senses to seek a greater understanding; through observation, analysis and piecing together what they experience, they dismantle and reassemble the original, creating a new and individual whole. Synaesthetic activities (such as encouraging children to make pictorial representations of smells or noises, for example) are a dominant feature and seek to give children a fuller understanding of the world.

### **Progettazione (The Program)**

*"This is not a free journey but neither is it a journey with rigid timetables and schedules; rather, it is akin to a journey guided by a compass". Carlina Rinaldi*

Notoriously difficult to translate, the term progettazione is often understood to mean emergent curriculum or child-centred curriculum, but the reality is far more complex.

Reggio educator's talk of working without a teacher-led curriculum but this does not mean that forward thinking and preparation do not take place. Rather, teachers learn to observe children closely, listen to them carefully and give value to their own ideas so that they might gain an understanding of what interests children most and create strategies that allow the children to build upon their interests. Topics for study can come from the children themselves, from subjects that the teacher knows naturally interest children and also from the family and the greater community.



Projects do not follow rigid timetables but rather meander slowly at the pace of the children. Children may be involved in a specific project over a lengthy period of time but not every day; rather, they return to it as their interests dictate, revisiting and re-evaluating what they learn.

Children are the protagonists of their learning and are encouraged by teachers to develop projects and solve problems among themselves, using the teacher as a tool who can 'lend' help, information and experience when necessary. Central to this mode of learning and teaching is the development of reciprocal relationships of love and trust between adult and child and between the children themselves. Learning always takes place within a group setting because Reggio educators see interaction and the consideration of differing points of view to be fundamental to the learning process. The building of such relationships and indeed the development of such projects that can continue for days, weeks and sometimes the school year, takes a great amount of time and cannot be constrained by school timetables or specialist curricular lessons. Time, and how it is conceived, is therefore an important factor. Within the nurseries, learning and teaching take place always at the pace of the child.

### **What is the role of the teacher in this type of learning process?**

The role of the teacher in the learning–teaching relationship known as *progettazione* can be summarised as follows.

- The teacher seeks to know each child as an individual person and to create a trusting relationship in which learning can take place.
- The teacher strives to support and encourage the child on the learning journey, encouraging them to reflect and to question. In this sense, the role of the teacher is not to dispense information or simply to correct. Rather, the teacher is like a tool that the children use when most needed. Sometimes they may observe; at other moments they act as co-investigators or scribes. They may challenge or provoke ideas through the use of open-ended questions and provocations of many kinds. Indeed, a fundamental stage in *progettazione* is knowing how to relaunch an idea or concept with the children in a way which provokes them into taking their understanding and experience to the next level.
- There is an enormous respect for children's own theories and hypotheses. Allowing children to make mistakes in their quest to solve problems is considered fundamental to the learning process. Teachers are not quick to intervene at every problem the children confront. Indeed, allowing children to travel along what the adult may consider 'the wrong path' and encouraging the children to realise this autonomously is considered an important, if controversial, learning strategy. Through close observation and evaluation of evidence, the teacher learns to judge when intervention is most appropriate. It is only when time is taken to build a close and trusting relationship with the children that the teacher can become confident in this role. This remains one of the principal reasons for teachers and children remaining together for the three-year duration.
- The teacher is also a researcher into the ways in which children learn. Indeed, the place of ongoing research in the classroom has grown and



developed significantly throughout the years. While what is termed research in Reggio schools may not always be equated with scientific research in tertiary educational establishments, there is no doubt as to the value of the search for meaning and understanding that Reggio educators strive for.

Carlina Rinaldi has described the place of this research in the following way:

*'Research as a term capable of describing the straining to know which is activated each time authentic processes of knowledge are created. Research to describe the individual and common journey in the direction of new universes of possibility ...'*  
Carlina Rinaldi

As such the educator must observe the child's learning process as closely as possible. By observing, the teacher enters into a relationship with the child. Reggio educators spend a huge amount of time observing children working in small groups in an attempt to come closer to the children's understanding. The process of observation is considered partial and subjective, hence the need to observe and re-observe and to consider varying points of view.

### Documentation

Fundamental to the teacher's role is the documentation of the child's learning process.



Documentation, in terms of photographic and written wall panels placed at both adult and child height, is a prominent feature of the schools and centres. However, when teachers talk of creating documentation they mean something much more complex. It is important to understand that documentation in terms of the Reggio Emilia Approach is a process which takes place during the child's learning. It is not something that is made after the child has finished working. This has huge implications for the teacher's role and for the path children's learning is encouraged to take. As educators observe, document and analyse children's learning journeys, they are able to make informed hypotheses about how to guide children in their learning. It is obvious then that documentation is far removed from photographic displays of completed project work.

Carlina Rinaldi offers the following explanation:

- Documentation means to produce traces of an observation.
- Documentation makes visible.
- Documentation is for children, teachers, parents, society.
- Documentation can give an image of the child ...

And again:

- Documentation is a way of entering the dark zone; of understanding how we learn.
- Documentation helps us to share the responsibility of teaching.

And again, she states:

Documentation is this process, which is dialectic, based on affective bonds and also poetic; it not only accompanies the knowledge-building process but in a certain sense impregnates it.

Because teachers at Reggio believe strongly in the partiality of any given opinion and therefore in the necessity to share and discuss differing points of view, they use a variety of means for the creation of documentation including audio and video recordings, photographs, drawings and written notes. These are always transcribed, listened to again and again, and shared with the co-teacher and indeed all the educators in school.

It is through sharing and discussing documentation that teachers feel most able to interpret and evaluate the learning process and to anticipate the most appropriate step to take with the children. In this sense the documentation can be seen to represent an assessment of the child's learning while also providing opportunities for self-assessment as children revisit their experiences. As the teachers revisit the documentation again and again they gain a closer understanding of the child's capabilities and possibilities. It is a fundamental belief of the Reggio teachers that through documentation they are able to evaluate – or give value – not simply to what the child can do but what the child could do, given the correct opportunity. Progettazione therefore cannot be equated with a set curriculum of any sort as learning does not develop in a linear manner and cannot be organised into complete 'units'.

Rather, by building a trusting relationship with the child and accompanying and guiding them on the path of their learning, by documenting their learning processes and giving value to all the child's possibilities, the teacher creates a reciprocal relationship of learning and teaching. Progettazione is a metaphorical dance between teacher and child – a spiral of knowledge.



### **Community and Parent–School Relationships**

Reggio educators describe their approach to learning and teaching as a 'pedagogy of relationships' as it is founded on the conviction that we learn through making connections between things, concepts and experiences, and that we do so by interacting with other people and with our surrounding environment. This is evident in the key role given to participation at every level: both within school (between children and between children and adults) and also out with the school (between families and school and between the greater community and school). Parent and Community Participation is one of the most distinctive features of the Reggio Approach. Its central importance to the life of the school is highlighted in the Charter of Rights, which includes a section on the rights of parents, and states:


"It is the right of parents to participate actively, and with voluntary adherence to the basic principles, in the growth, care and development of their children who are entrusted to the public institution. Participation is an educational strategy that

characterises our way of being and teaching. Participation of the children, the teachers and the families, not only by taking part in something but by being part of it, its essence, part of a common identity, a 'we' that we give life to through participation".

The development of strong links between the home and school encourages:

- continuity in the children's lives
- the creation of a reciprocal network of communication
- participation by all involved (children, teachers, parents, community) in the life of the school
- feelings of 'ownership' by all involved.

How do parents and families participate in the life of the schools? Participation is encouraged at various levels.

- Participation begins even before the children have started school, through a comprehensive integration programme. This involves meetings between children, parents and teachers to build an image of the child as an individual, and often involves the child doing a task such as making a 'holiday booklet' of photographs and favourite nursery rhymes, etc., which can be used as stimulus for discussion between child and teacher. Integration takes place over a period of approximately one week and parent contact is gradually reduced so that the child gains confidence in the new environment. The integration period is considered extremely important, not only for the child but also for parents and teachers, as it is at this stage that a relationship of collaboration and trust is built.
 
- Parents can also be asked to become directly involved in the observation and documentation process of their child's learning if the school thinks it would be valuable to understand how the child acts in the home setting, so allowing teachers to build a more complete image of the child. The parent may be asked to keep a journal, for example, and take photographs that are then shared with teachers and with other parents in a group setting. Meetings to discuss children's learning experiences are frequent and tend to take place in a group setting, reflecting Reggio educators' belief in the group dynamic.
- At a daily level parents participate by interacting with educators and other parents when going to collect their child at the end of the day. Reggio educators are always willing to dedicate a surprising amount of time not only to speaking to parents but also, crucially, to listening to them every day. Documentation also plays a key role in parents' daily participation in their children's experiences by means of the daily agenda which is produced for parents at the end of each day. It describes the activities children have been involved in and over recent years it has become increasingly visual, with the widespread diffusion of digital photography and scanning facilities. Parents are therefore able to see photos of children interacting on the same day they

were taken. This allows parents to enter into their child's experience and create meaningful dialogue with them and is very different from settings which witness the use of closed-circuit television and direct internet access to pre-school classrooms, and which contribute to what Carlina Rinaldi has termed 'the culture of suspicion'.

- At a practical level, participation takes place in many different ways. Parents and grandparents are encouraged to contribute to the upkeep of the buildings and gardens by volunteering to repair furniture, paint surfaces and equipment, make and build toys and equipment, and tend to gardens and play areas, in short volunteering any particular experience they have. Their involvement is also encouraged through participation in school outings and celebrations. Parties for particular family groups such as grandparents are often held to celebrate the importance and uniqueness of these relationships.

### **Environment**

*'A Reggio pre-school is a special kind of place, one in which young human beings are invited to grow in mind, in sensibility and in belonging to a broader community'.*

*Jerome S Bruner*



The physical environment of the Reggio schools is one of the most well known aspects and perhaps also one of the most misunderstood. It is a common misconception that to 'do Reggio' entails whitewashing walls and introducing mirrors, three-dimensional pyramids and light tables into the nursery classroom. The reality is of course much more complex. We must ask why these things are done in order to understand the significance of the environment in pedagogical terms.

Participation and collectivity, key ideas that permeate all areas of the Reggio Approach, are of fundamental importance in considering the creation and use of the physical space of the school.

Rather than separate spaces being used for separate purposes, the schools are composed of a series of connecting spaces that flow into one another. Rooms open onto a central piazza, mirroring the central meeting places in the town, and children move freely through the space.

This type of openness is conducive to participation and interaction and to the general value of openness to the many differences that children, teachers and community bring with them to the schools – differences of race, religion, sex, language, culture.

Furniture is designed to be multi-functional. Screens may be used to allow children to create shadow pictures and stories while at the same time serving as a divider of two spaces. Children are wonderful constructors and take delight in constructing and inhabiting new places. No Reggio school looks the same at the end of the year as it did at the beginning.

The space must be conducive to research and autonomous discovery, both for individual children and for groups of children working together. An enormous amount of attention and effort goes into the design of furniture and organisation of space and materials to maximise the ease of use by the children. The youngest children sleep in cocoon-like open-ended beds that allow them to get in and out independently; art materials in both the central and mini ateliers are in see-through containers so that children can easily find things on their own. Mirrors are used in a variety of ways. They hang from the ceiling over changing tables, can be found at floor level and form play apparatus in the form of pyramids that the children can enter to explore the images they become part of. Children therefore gain an understanding of themselves in relation to their surroundings, a belief that is central to the philosophy.

The importance of the aesthetic dimension for learning has already been explained. This is very much in evidence in the schools' physical make-up. These schools are multi-sensory environments, and materials can be displayed in many ways and for different reasons, encouraging children to look at shades and colours and consider how to use them, and to consider textures and smells. These schools are not, however, painted in the bright primary colours that many adults misconceive to be favoured by children. Instead there is a pervasive feeling of light and space brought about by the use of light or white walls and the way in which children's artwork painted on transparent sheets creates interesting layering and diffused light, and the way in which movable walls and wall-size windows allow the interior to integrate with the outside environment. Perhaps again reflecting the centrality of the child and his or her relationship with the school, it is the children themselves who contribute colour through their clothing and belongings, their artwork and sculptures.

The outside environment is also an obvious source of colour and texture, and plants are widely used in the classrooms as well as in interior courtyards. This also serves to create a natural link between the inside and outside environments of the school. Fostering a link with the outside environment is important because a school as a place of learning and discovery cannot be seen to be an island. Rather, within the school children learn how to become full and active participants in the greater, outside environment. A school must nourish an understanding of what is happening 'on the outside'. Outside play areas and equipment are very much in evidence, occasionally forming a physical link between inside and outside, perhaps in the form of canopies and verandas. Through the use of child-built installations such as the Amusement Park for Birds at the Villetta pre-school establishment, the outside becomes a learning centre where children can learn about the elements and physical forces.



### Teachers as Learners

*“Good staff development is not something that is undertaken every now and then, reflecting only on the words of someone else. Instead, it is a vital and daily aspect of our work, of our personal and professional identities. Staff development is seen above all as an indispensable vehicle by which to make stronger the quality of our interaction with children and among ourselves”.* Carlina Rinaldi

The municipal education system 0–6 has long been recognised for its outstanding and exemplary approach to the continuing professional development of all educators. Continuing professional development is not about developing teachers' understanding of how to teach but about developing their understanding of how children learn. Teachers are encouraged to understand children's learning processes rather than acquiring skills and knowledge that they then expect children to learn. Research is a fundamental learning strategy for children in the Reggio schools and this is mirrored in the approach to the role of the educator in the learning process and to professional development. Teachers are seen as learners first and foremost.

Professional development in Reggio is considered to be a continuing evolutionary process that is an intrinsic part of the teacher's day. At its heart is the belief in staff development as change; staff development as promoting participation and interaction.

Co-teachers are given ring-fenced time daily to discuss and evaluate the day's work, attempting to interpret the children's learning processes but also evaluating their own role and working together to predict possible learning paths. A constant dialogue of opinion is created in the joint analysis and interpretation of documentation. The fact that two teachers work together with a group of children for three years means that a very close professional bond develops between co-teachers. It is a bond in which particular talents and strengths are shared and where new teachers have the opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues.



Once a week, teachers are given time to come together as a group so that they can share their analyses and hypotheses with the rest of the staff, including the school's atelierista and the pedagogista (a pedagogical adviser who works closely with teachers from a group of local schools). The key to these meetings is dialogue. As with the children they teach, conflict of ideas and opinions is considered to be not only a positive contributor to learning but also a fundamental factor. Project work is discussed and there is a continual exchange of reflections and of opinions. Teachers are given the opportunity to use a variety of documentary media in communicating their work with colleagues.

Through the pedagogists, teachers have the opportunity to meet with colleagues from different schools within the town to share their experiences and discuss the learning that is taking place in their schools. Professional development also takes other forms. Through close relationships with parents at individual, group and school meetings that seek to share the children's creative and learning processes, teachers become increasingly aware of the importance of listening and of considering differing viewpoints. Reggio educators also believe strongly that teachers must be individuals who, like the children they work with, are naturally curious about the world they live in and about learning generally. While much time is given to ensuring that teachers have the opportunity to become competent in the various artistic activities that they wish to share with the children, the emphasis is not simply on the acquisition of skills



but rather on encouraging teachers to think in different ways and to consider different viewpoints so that they might best respond to the children's spontaneous learning. Teachers are therefore given the opportunity to meet and talk with people living and working outside the boundaries of education such as scientists, musicians, writers, architects and poets.

As with other key aspects of the Reggio Approach, within its commitment to continuing professional development there are values of collegiality, interaction and participation. This is perhaps most evident in the absence of a hierarchical staff structure in the schools, the complete lack of externally imposed policies, manuals or curriculum guidelines, and the fact that goals for professional development are determined by the teachers themselves.