Reggio Emilia: A Child-Centered Approach to Cognitive Development

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History: Theoretical and Conceptual Basis for the Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education has a rich and diverse history. Following the end of World War II and the shift of Italy’s government from Fascism to Democracy, new educational ideas, influenced by educators like John Dewey & Ceestin Freinet, were gaining momentum. One major leader of this movement was Bruno Ciari who wrote books and held meetings where he suggested early childhood education could promote a more just society. As a result of this movement and in response to student protests, pushes from women’s groups, and the spreading of a passionate pamphlet by Lorenzo Milani & Scuola di Barbiana about class discrimination in Italian schools, “the 10-year period from 1968 to 1977 saw the enactment of many key pieces of social legislation” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012, p. 23). This legislation included laws that established government-sponsored preschools and infant-toddler centers, paid maternity leave, equal pay for men & women, and more protection of women’s rights. All of these things influenced and paved the way for new educational approaches in Italy, and Reggio Emilia is one approach that came out of this. (Edwards et al., 2012; NAREA, 2014).

Reggio Emilia is a city in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy and is known for having a “tradition of cooperative work done in all areas of the economy and organization” (Gandini, 2014, para. 2). Therefore, around 1945 the community of Reggio Emilia, guided by the Union of Italian Women and Loris Malaguzzi, banded together with a strong “desire to bring change and create a new, more just world, free from oppression” (Gandini, 2014, para. 1). Using donated land and salvage material from bombed houses this group worked together to build and open the first preschool in Reggio Emilia. In 1963, Loris Malaguzzi headed the charge to open the first municipal preschool in Reggio Emilia known as the Robinson School, and within 10 years over
40 municipal early childhood schools were running in the municipality of Reggio Emilia. Currently, there is great disparity in the quality and availability of preschools and infant-toddler centers in Italy, though the municipal region of Reggio Emilia is regarded for its outstanding early childhood education centers. (Edwards et al., 2012).

Reggio Emilia schools succeed partly because of the many influences that have inspired this approach. Before teaching in Reggio Emilia, Loris Malaguzzi taught middle school. Though he found great joy working with children at the school he became highly critical of the school’s methods of teaching including “pushing pre-packaged knowledge”, having a strong focus on authority, and holding indifferent views towards children (Edwards et al, 2012, p. 29). Therefore, you will not find any of these things in a Reggio Emilia school. Besides Malaguzzi’s own experiences many theorists’ work influenced the creation of the Reggio Emilia approach. One of these theorist was Jean Piaget. Specifically Piaget’s work that described the child’s work like that of a scientist; in that the child is curious about the world and uses methods of research and inquiry to create meaning and understanding about the world (Edwards et al, 2012). Another theorist influencing Reggio Emilia philosophy is Lev Vygotsky’s work on social learning and specifically his description of the zone of proximal development, which according to Malaguzzi “is the distance between the levels of capacities expressed by children and their levels of potential development, attainable with the help of adults or more advanced contemporaries” (Edwards et al., 2012, p.58). Malaguzzi thought that teachers should strive to listen and understand children’s thinking and promote learning not through the act of telling children, but rather by creating environments that would promote children’s learning through their explorations and interactions (Edwards et al., 2012). In Lela Gandini’s interview with Loris Malaguzzi (2012), Malaguzzi explains that the inspiration for the Reggio Emilia philosophy was
found in many sources including those described above and others like Brofenbrenner, Dewey, Bruner, Hawkins, Kaye, Shaffer, Gardner, Moscovi’s & Mugny’s work on representation & cognition, as well as the unique and ever-changing culture and history of the region (Edwards et al.). Malaguzzi goes on to further state, “It is important for pedagogy to not be the prisoner of too much certainty, but instead to be aware of both the relativity of its powers and the difficulties of translating its ideals into practice” (Edwards et al, 2012, p.37). The Reggio Emilia philosophy does not provide a rigid model or set curricula that is to be replicated exactly, rather this approach is a collective set of knowledge to be used to create top-quality preschools and infant-toddler centers (NAREA, 2014).

In the Reggio Emilia schools children are viewed as having rights and as competent beings that have over one hundred languages or methods of expressing meaning and exploring ideas and experiences (Hewett, 2001; Edwards et al., 2012; Bork and Hardwood, 2010). Reggio schools primarily serve children between zero and six years-old. The school’s physical environment is seen as the third teacher and is designed to promote “movement, interdependence, and interaction” and include spaces like a piazza, atelier (studio/laboratory), dining area, music area, and access to the outdoors and surrounding community (Edwards et al., 2012, p.41-42; NAREA, 2014). There is no set schedule or curriculum at a Reggio school and activities are not pre-determined by teachers. Instead, children construct their own learning experience with the support of their teachers and families. According to a study on how Reggio Emilia promotes inclusiveness, “the primary goals of Reggio schools are to ensure that every child feels a sense of belonging within the schools community and to strengthen each child’s sense of identity as an individual” (Edmiaston & Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 66). As such, Reggio Emilia philosophy welcomes diversity and creates a space where children from diverse
backgrounds can express their thoughts and explore their interests. Within this approach a teacher plays the role of listener, facilitator, guide, caregiver, and documenter. The teachers are learning alongside the children and understand that knowledge is ever-changing and does not have a pre-defined ending or way of being understood and expressed. Within a Reggio school one teacher is known as the atelierista or studio teacher. This person typically has an arts background and works to make sure children have access to many materials and expressive methods to “further the educational projects and objectives of the school community” (Gandini, 2014). Parents were among the people helping to run and support the original nursery schools in Reggio Emilia and continue to play an integral part of the schools community today. “Participation in the education of children is considered by Reggio educators to be a right and a responsibility of parents and families” and in turn parents are welcome to take active roles within the school’s community and gain insight into their child’s learning by reviewing documentation (NAREA, 2014, Philosophical questions section under Q: I understand that parents are very involved in Reggio schools).

**How the Reggio Emilia Approach Supports Cognitive & Language Development**

According to David Bjorkland young children’s brains can and will develop immensely during the early childhood years (2012), and as such it is essential that any educational approach support cognitive and language development during this period. Since every Reggio Emilia school will operate in a unique way reflecting the students, teachers, parents, and community it serves along with the physical environment it exists in, each school may have their own unique ways of supporting this development. However, there are some common practices within most Reggio Emilia inspired schools which help to guide development.
Reggio Emilia schools support children’s cognitive and language development by providing them with many opportunities and resources to be able to express their learning, ideas, and plans through the “hundred languages of children”. The hundred languages requires providing children with a variety of modes and mediums of expression including, but not limited to art materials, musical instruments, stories, stage, water table, natural materials, and multimedia resources like a light projector “so that children encounter many avenues for thinking, revising, constructing, negotiating, developing and symbolically expressing their thoughts and feelings” (NAREA, 2014, Philosophical questions section under Q: What is the meaning of the phrase “the hundred languages of children”). According to George Forman (1996), “As children compare these various forms of representations, they confront new possibilities and generate new questions that would not have occurred had they only used one medium” (as cited in Hewett, 2001, p. 99), and as such the “hundred languages of children” enhances the creation of meaning and the different ways of knowing (Hewett, 2001). This approach was inspired by many prominent educational theories including Ronald Gardener’s multiple intelligences theory, Piaget’s tenets of constructivism and the importance of children interacting with the physical environment, Dewey’s concept of thinking is research, and Moscovici’s and Mugny’s beliefs in the “genesis of representation and the importance of interpersonal cognitive constructions” (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 60; Hewett, 2001). At Reggio Emilia schools the hundred languages can be observed in many ways. The physical environment is set-up in a way that allows children access to varied materials, teachers’ create provocations (shown in Figure 1) that support student explorations, and ample work-space is provided in the art studio and throughout the school.
Second, children at a Reggio inspired school engage in self-directed projects either alone or in groups with other children. For example at a given moment one child may be trying out instruments made available in a low sitting basket in the play room, another child may be using play-dough, leaves, logs, and dinosaurs to create a jungle and a small group of children may be working in the art studio with water-colors. To support the hundred languages teachers can be seen observing children, asking the children questions about their work, and documenting everything that is happening by writing it down, taking pictures, or filming video. Finally, when a parent comes by to pick up their child they will often ask the child or teacher about the child’s work. Teachers and parents take an active interest in the work of the children to let them know their work is valued and important and to learn from and with the child (Edwards et al., 2012; Hewett, 2001).

Another way the Reggio Emilia approach supports language and cognitive development is through its strong dedication to social relationship-building. In an article examining the Reggio Emilia approach, Valerie Mercilliott Hewett (2001) explains that the approach’s
philosophy “places a strong emphasis on children’s social construction of knowledge through relationships” (p. 96) and not in isolation. Social development theories within the Reggio Emilia approach were inspired by the work of Lev Vygotsky. Specifically, as mentioned earlier, Reggio Emilia philosophy supports development within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) through methods like teacher inquiry that supports children in furthering their investigation or the teacher or another child assisting a child that is struggling (Hewett, 2001). For example in the situation where a child is painting with watercolors a teacher may notice the child getting frustrated with their water color paint because it is not showing up dark enough. The teacher may ask if any of the other children know how to make the paint darker; or the child may take the initiative and ask a child that they notice has dark colors for help. If no children know the teacher may provide a suggestion. If another child has an idea they will explain their method to the struggling child. If this works great; if not it may create an opportunity for another child to suggest their method. Another thing that could happen is the teacher may notice that most children’s watercolor is showing up very light, the teacher may ask the children if they have any ideas for how to make the paint darker. If more than one idea is suggested the group can test the different methods and decide which one is most effective; some children may find different methods for doing the same thing. In this way, Reggio environments support maximum social interactions between all members of the school’s community in order to encourage “collaboration, dialogue, conflict, negotiation, and cooperation with peers and adults” (Hewett, 2001 p.96).

Reggio Emilia’s effectiveness in supporting Cognitive & Language Development
The development of language and cognitive abilities is essential in early childhood education and any approach needs to support this. To explore the effectiveness of the Reggio Emilia approach one need only to spend time observing children in a Reggio classroom.

Bo Sun Kim and Linda Farr Darling from the University of British Columbia conducted a qualitative case study in a Reggio inspired childcare center. Their findings provide insight into Reggio’s effectiveness in a variety of areas of cognitive and language development. The study focused on a group of 4-year-olds during their explorations of Monet’s paintings called the ‘Shades of Pink’ project (Kim & Darling, 2009). During the project children engaged in a long discussion with one another about what they noticed in the painting. Some of the children could not agree on how many people were in the painting so they debated with one another openly expressing reasons for their thinking. While this occurred there was little interruption from the teacher who was instead documenting the discussion. Next, rather than tell the children what she thought to be the right answer; the teacher instead worked together with the children to design an experiment to test the competing hypotheses. After conducting the tests, some children changed their perspective to one they had previously disagreed with. “Through negotiation, children gradually construct knowledge by taking reflective stances towards each other’s views, and honour the power of each other’s perspectives toward understanding subject matter” (Kim & Darling, 2009, p.138). In this example children engaged in sharing their viewpoints and hearing others viewpoints. Then they were shown that all viewpoints were valued by being considered important enough to be included in the test. Finally, many children adapted their thinking from their original schema after the experiment. Allowing children to test new ideas in different ways likely promoted this shift in thinking; whereas had the teacher just given them the answer, they may not have reconsidered their perceptions and this change in schema may not have occurred.
(Bjorkland 2012). As Piaget (1973) noted, “A student who achieves a certain knowledge through free investigation and spontaneous effort will later be able to retain it” (as cited in Hewett, 2001). By using problem solving methods like the experiment described above children are able to explore cause and effect relationships and construct their own knowledge and understanding of the physical environment (Bjorkland, 2012). (Kim & Darling, 2009).

Another strength of the Reggio approach in supporting cognitive and language skills is memory development. In the ‘Shades of Pink’ study the children and teacher re-visited the project after a three week break by looking at documentation and discussing the children’s memories about the project. Many of the children re-called specific details about the conversations that had occurred. One child remembered one of the other child’s original thoughts about the painting and how that child later changed their mind after the experiment (Kim & Darling, 2009). In Reggio schools memory development and in turn executive functioning is supported by documenting not just the finished project but also the process of the learning taking place and then creating a space and time for children to re-visit this (Bjorkland, 2012; Edwards et al., 2012). An example of this documentation for a watercolor project can be seen in Figure 2.
As mentioned before Reggio Emilia philosophy understands that children have a hundred languages for expressing meaning and provides opportunities for children to explore their ideas. By representing these ideas with different mediums children develop a greater understanding of their world and thoughts. At Reggio schools children may use art, music, play, sand, cooking, multi-media sources, and more to represent their thoughts. (Edwards et al., 2012).

A study by Bork and Harwood (2010) studied how the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach may support intervention of selective mutism (SM). The authors theorized that since the Reggio Emilia approach would create “the unified inclusive classroom where what is meaningful to the child with SM is recognized, valued, welcomed, and communicated” (Bork & Harwood, 2010, p. 243) that this may help the SM child overcome their fears in a supportive and non-threatening environment. In Reggio schools vocabulary and fluency development occurs naturally by providing children with many modes of expression and by promoting social
relationships. Some ways that Arts in the Garden supports this is through reading stories, discussing the stories, singing songs, having a letter writing station with student mailboxes, having a set of letter stamps, and through teachers writing down things that are happening and then sharing what they write with the children. All of these activities expose children to language and vocabulary.

Phonological awareness and phonic skills are not addressed in the Reggio Emilia approach. One reason for this could be that a strong emphasis is placed on knowledge as a whole; therefore there is not a focus on specific skill development unless it relates to a meaningful project or activity (Hewett, 2001; Edwards et al., 2012). Second language learning is not specifically part of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. This may be a result of the lack of diversity of languages spoken in the Reggio Emilia region or that many people from this region stay in the region so there is less need to learn dual languages (Edwards et al., 2012). If a Reggio school was located in a more culturally diverse area they may want to consider incorporating language learning into their schools to support the needs of their students, families, and community. For example at the Reggio school I work at we incorporate other languages into the day through music and stories.

Conclusion

The Reggio Emilia approach supports cognitive and language development by encouraging children to represent their thinking through ‘the hundred languages children’ and by creating an environment of inclusivity and social relationship building. Some specific areas of development supported by this approach include problem-solving through experimentation, representing learning through different modes of expression, building vocabulary and language fluency through social interactions with other children and adults, and using documentation to support
early memory development and executive functioning skills. A challenge to implementing this approach is that it is labor intensive, resource intensive, and requires a highly-skilled staff. Additionally, in the United States the government is currently focused on creating universal curricula and standards that can be easily tested and evaluated (Spring, 2012). The Reggio approach does not align with these requirements since it allows children’s work to be directed by the child’s interests and chosen forms of expression and formal assessment like testing for specific knowledge and skills are not supported (Edwards et al, 2012). Reggio Emilia is an innovative approach to early childhood education and its philosophy and schools can provide educators with useful inspirations for supporting cognitive and language development.
References


