



The Reggio Emilia inspired approach



Storypark



Intro

As an early childhood educator, you understand the importance of creating a learning environment that fosters curiosity, exploration, and growth.

The Reggio Emilia approach does just that by supporting children's natural curiosity and desires to learn. In this ebook, we will delve deeper into the core principles of the Reggio Emilia philosophy and provoke your thinking to consider ways you can weave aspects of the philosophy into your own learning program.

Whether you're new to the Reggio Emilia approach or looking to expand your knowledge, this ebook is a valuable resource for early childhood educators who want to create a nurturing and enriching learning experience for their children



About the author

Sonya McIntyre holds a Bachelor of Education (teaching) ECE from Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand.

She has over 20 years of experience working in various roles within the ECE sector. A video of the 'amusement park for birds' project at university ignited her curiosity about the Reggio Emilia approach. She embarked on a self-directed learning journey, attending conferences in Australia, and joined a study group in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Sonya has since spent time exploring how educators worldwide have implemented the underpinnings of the approach in their centres.

Sonya believes the Reggio Emilia philosophy is unique to the schools and infant-toddler centres in Reggio Emilia itself and asserts that it cannot be copied or replicated in other contexts. She advocates for educators interested in the philosophy to understand that the work seen in Reggio Emilia is deeply rooted in the history, culture and values of the city and its citizens.

Sonya enjoys sharing her observations of the Reggio Emilia philosophy with other educators. She hopes that doing so will prompt them to explore their unique cultures and values.

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01



What is the Reggio Emilia approach?

The Reggio Emilia approach is an educational research project that connects children and adults as co-learners.

Born in a northern city of Italy, the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach has spread internationally. Educators from all corners of the world strive to implement its core philosophy into their educational settings.

An integral part of the philosophy is for educators to explore how each child learns. Educators in Reggio Emilia view all children as gifted and support them to express their knowledge through the “hundred languages of children.” The Reggio Emilia approach is not a curriculum. However, children are supported to learn through participating in project work, which can be both long or short-term.

These projects are driven not only by the children’s individual and group interests and their theories of the world but through ideas and happenings introduced by their educators and the community.



02

How can I implement the Reggio Emilia inspired approach in my setting?

The truth is, to be a Reggio Emilia Centre or School, you must first reside in the city of Reggio Emilia, in Northern Italy.

Reggio Emilia has a culture unique to the land it sits on. It is, however, possible to be inspired or influenced by the work of the educators in Reggio Emilia.

You can:

- Explore aspects of the philosophy and find a way to weave aspects of the core beliefs and principles into your own learning community.
- Respect and celebrate the cultures of your children and families, educators, and community.
- Commit to researching, learning, reflecting and questioning. It is an educational journey for children, families, and educators.



Reflection sheet

What beliefs and principles do your teaching team hold about children and how they learn?

What are the cultures of your children and their families?

What makes your learning community unique? Consider your geographic location and any societal influences that impact your community.

What worldviews does your teaching team hold? What influences these views, and how are they evident in your learning environment?



03

The social and cultural context of Reggio Emilia

When exploring the Reggio Emilia approach, you might wonder how to extract its core components and incorporate aspects of the philosophy in your setting.

It is important to understand that the way it looks in the city of Reggio Emilia is due to the social and cultural context in which it exists.

- Democratic involvement and responsible citizenship are highly valued in Reggio Emilia.
- The physical layouts of the infant-toddler centres and preschools often reflect the design and aesthetics of the city itself. The spacious piazzas, the beautiful ateliers, and the outdoor courtyards in the centres represent the public piazzas where friends and families meet and socialize. The multitude of art galleries inhabiting the city and the beautiful parks and green areas dotted throughout the city are reflected in the beautiful displays of children's work and the natural outdoor areas where children play.
- Italian culture is one of aesthetic beauty.
- The destruction and trauma caused by the second world war shaped the belief that children should be supported to be critical thinkers. The importance of children being actively engaged in their own education empowers them to contribute to a more equitable society. It is due to this belief that the philosophy explores not only children's learning but also their thinking.
- With a strong history of social activism, educators in Reggio Emilia see themselves as learners. Embarking on joint investigations to discover, explore and develop theories together, educators learn about themselves, the children, and about the process of learning itself.



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Reggio doesn't give children answers, it teaches them how to find the answers themselves

- Amelia Gambetti



04

Image of the child

The image of the child is a term widely used in early childhood education circles. It is one of the fundamental principles of the Reggio Approach.

Children are seen and celebrated as competent, knowledgeable, capable, and rich in potential.

We often think of children as being “future citizens,” “future artists,” “future scientists,” or “future contributors to society.” An important theme that stands out in Reggio Emilia is that children are citizens now. And when given the right tools, resources and support, they can share valuable contributions with their community and society.

Democratic involvement and responsible citizenship are highly valued in Reggio Emilia.

- With the guidance of their educators, children explore and develop unique theories about their world.
- Their thoughts and opinions are valued, listened to, and respected. Educators and parents take children’s ideas seriously, empowering them to be confident, self-aware, and have a voice they are not afraid to share.

- The respect given to children helps them develop a strong self-image as creative thinkers, doers, and curious learners who are competent.



Reflection sheet

What strategies could be used to help children explore, develop and represent their theories?

How do you listen to and respect children's ideas and opinions?

How can you empower children to share their voice more?



The role of the adult is to intervene as little as possible; instead to observe, to listen, to interpret and to facilitate the children's research by providing interesting and stimulating experiences and resources.

- Understanding the Reggio Approach,
Thornton & Brunton 2005



05

The Hundred Languages of Children

The poem titled *The Hundred Languages of Children* symbolizes the many ways children communicate their knowledge and express their thoughts.

Children can communicate using more than speech and writing. They can dance, they can draw, and they can build. They can sing and make music. They can use clay, paint, pencils or chalk.

In Reggio Emilia, educators provide children with resources to express themselves using the hundred languages. Encouraging and supporting these many languages nurtures children's creative expression and gives value to the unique and varied ways children can communicate their thoughts, ideas and theories.



100 Languages

NO WAY. THE HUNDRED IS THERE

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.
A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.
The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.

The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.
They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

Loris Malaguzzi,
Founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach

06



The atelier in Reggio Emilia

Atelier: A workshop or studio, especially one used by an artist or designer.

In the infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia, one distinctive characteristic of each school is the presence of an atelier, with several schools also having mini-ateliers leading off the main classroom.

Ateliers are spaces where children can explore, using many different “languages” to express themselves.

- They are places where children can be creative, research their theories and make discoveries.
- Children are introduced to and master new skills and techniques using a range of mediums that allow them to express their thoughts and ideas.
- They are also places where educators become researchers, learning about the projects children are working on and using documentation to understand children’s thinking better.

- A wide variety of materials are available for children to explore and create with.
- Clay, wirework, drawing, painting, musical instruments, and technology give children a medium to speak in almost every language.
- Mastery of the equipment and resources comes from having the opportunity from a young age to explore the properties of different materials alongside an atelierista.

The atelierista is an artist who works alongside children, guiding their explorations and supporting their expressive and creative work. They help educators with observations and documentation, working together to understand children’s thinking and providing experiences and resources that allow children to deepen their thoughts and ideas through short and long-term projects.

Reflection sheet

What new materials and resources could you provide for children to express themselves?

How could you or your team become more confident in supporting children to use different materials?

Can you identify any barriers to sourcing and providing new materials?

07

Documentation in Reggio Emilia

The educators in Reggio Emilia place a lot of emphasis on the role of documentation in children's learning.

- Documentation is a process that occurs alongside children, capturing their questions, their ideas, their wonderings and their theories.
- It develops over time and becomes a celebration of the learning that has taken place for both individuals and groups of children. Documentation is an evolving process where educators are researchers, learning about children, predicting where their learning is going. It is also used as a tool for planning, allowing them to support children's explorations as they undertake investigations or projects.

The documentation of children's learning is a valuable resource that allows educators to share, engage in dialogue, and work together with families and community to build a deeper understanding of the learning process. It allows them to truly listen to the many ways children communicate.



Reflection sheet

What does your current documentation process look like?

How do you record and share continuity in children's learning?

How do you document your own thoughts and ideas that develop as you observe children's learning over time?

08

Relationships

At the core of the Reggio Emilia approach lies relationships. Relationships between children and educators.

Relationships within the teaching team of educators, atelierista, pedagoga, and cooks. Relationships between educators and parents. Relationships with the physical environment and resources.

Finally, the relationship between the schools and the larger community is celebrated and nurtured. In Reggio Emilia, the environment is often called “the third teacher.” It refers to the value placed on providing children with an aesthetically pleasing environment, fostering curiosity and exploration, and abundant in quality resources which children work with to both investigate their thoughts and theories and to express themselves.





The Reggio Emilia environment

In Reggio Emilia, children spend their days in environments with a rich selection of sensory experiences.

- Children are surrounded by beautiful sights, sounds, smells, textures, and experiences that invite their sensory participation and evoke curiosity and wonder.
- The environments allow children to be expressive, investigative, reflective, and curious. They can question and explore, make discoveries and be involved in various activities during their day.
- Food and the sharing of meals are at the heart of what is so wonderful about Italian culture, and this is reflected in the centres. The cooks work with children, involving them in preparing and serving food. Meals are eaten together in the dining room, with porcelain plates, real cutlery and glasses for drinking. Mealtimes are a time for conversation and appreciation of the food being shared.
- The importance of light and reflection is evident, with large windows providing natural light and an opportunity for children to watch the world outside and feel connected to other rooms within the centre.
- Children are encouraged to explore light and shadow with light tables, shadow screens and projectors. Mirrors provide further depth to this light and shadow play and offer endless opportunities for creativity and discovery.



Reflection sheet

How does your learning environment encourage children to investigate and be curious?

What changes can you make to your environment to support children to work on projects over days, weeks or months?

How does the temporal environment support project work?

Reflection sheet

How does your environment provide space for children to store and return to their projects?

How do you take a team approach to making environmental changes in your learning service?

What barriers do you currently face that prevent you from providing a space for children that promotes sensory exploration?



Resources in Reggio Emilia

In the infant-toddler centres and preschools in Reggio Emilia, the resources and materials provided for children differ from those you traditionally associate with being suitable for an early learning environment.

There are “typical” resources: dress-up costumes, dramatic play furniture, dolls, puzzles, books, board games, art and craft materials, construction resources etc. You will also find some peculiar resources that you may not have considered appropriate or exciting for young children. The educators in Reggio Emilia offer open-ended resources and materials that are both recycled and natural. The materials encourage children to explore and investigate with all their senses.

- Clay and wire are popular artistic mediums. They allow children to mould and shape their thoughts and ideas, transforming them into something tangible that others can view. The educators work closely with children from a young age, supporting them to become familiar with these expressive mediums and learn about their properties. Mastering various mediums’ possibilities helps children use them confidently in their investigations and project work.
- Some materials invite children to explore with other senses. Think of spices, dried herbs, and tea leaves. These materials invite children to explore and consider the different smells of the world.
- Objects that invite exploration with light and shadow are also commonly found.
- Loose parts are very popular. Educators source a wide variety of resources for children to use in different play areas. In construction, dramatic play, light, reflection and shadow play, you will find a variety of beautiful and open-ended objects such as colourful and transparent beads, buttons, plastic objects, stones, leaves, feathers, and dried flowers.
- You will find small glass jars of paint in almost every shade of colour imaginable. Providing colour in subtle shades of difference allows children to represent the world as they see it visually.

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Resources in Reggio Emilia continued

- Pens, pencils, charcoal, felt markers, inks, and dyes are available for children as another medium of communication and creative expression. The educators also offer paper in multiple different sizes, colours and shapes.
- Children are encouraged to explore light and shadow with light tables, shadow screens and projectors. Mirrors provide further depth to this light and shadow play and offer endless opportunities for creativity and discovery.

Although educators set up provocations to stimulate children's curiosity and investigation, many resources and materials are organized to allow children to access them independently. Children know where to find things, and they know and trust that they will be able to find and use them as they wish.

When children understand that resources are available daily, they use them only as needed, not because it is novel or out of fear of missing out. In this way, children also learn to respect the resources and environment.

There is a common belief that to be authentically inspired by the centres in Reggio Emilia, you must display natural materials in cane baskets, wooden bowls and glass jars. But this is not true! Resources are displayed in various containers in Reggio's preschools and infant-toddler centres. Plastic takeaway containers, ice cream containers, anything goes. You name it; any vessel will do! Plastic perspex containers are popular as they allow children to view the contents from all angles.



Reflection sheet

Make a list of resources you currently provide for children to explore and be creative with:

Which categories do these resources fall into?

Identify new resources for each category, and explore ways to access these new resources:

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The Remida Centre - a source of sustainable materials

A common belief is that to “do Reggio,” one must throw out all plastic and gimmicky toys and fill your classroom with baskets and trays of natural materials.

Indeed, children can explore a wide range of natural materials. But classrooms in Reggio are also abundant with interesting recycled materials. These materials foster children to be imaginative and explore the possibilities of objects no longer fit for their original use.

This resourcefulness is a very sustainable way of existing in Reggio Emilia, the Remida centre supports using recycled materials in schools and community groups.

The centre collects, displays, and distributes alternative and reclaimed materials from industrial production’s unsold stock and scrap materials, helping to reinvent their use and meaning.

Walking or cycling through the streets of Reggio Emilia, it is evident that the relationship between the schools and the city itself is significant.

There are many places where you can see the children’s work displayed publicly, a celebration and acknowledgement of the contribution that the youngest citizens of Reggio Emilia have made to this beautiful city.



Recommended reading

As you can see, there are many layers to fully understanding the Reggio approach. This information is only a light brush over the surface of what makes this educational project so popular and successful.

Choosing one area to learn and grow in will allow you to reflect on your current practice and consider how the Reggio philosophy can inspire you to make meaningful changes that reflect your own culture and community.

Below is a list of books and online resources that helped guide the creation of this ebook. Reading further will help you further your understanding of the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

**Understanding the Reggio Approach:
Early years education in practice**

Authors: Linda Thornton, Pat Brunton

**Reggio Emilia Encounters: Children and
Adults in Collaboration**

Authors: Pat Wharton, Linda Kinney

**Working in the Reggio Way: A Beginner's
Guide for American Teachers**

Author: Julianne Wurm

**Bringing the Reggio Approach to your
Early Years Practice**

Authors: Linda Thornton, Pat Brunton,
Sandy Green

[North American Reggio Emilia Alliance](#)

[Reggio Children](#)

[Scuole e nidi d'infanzia](#)

Storypark Blog:

[Nature and the Reggio Emilia approach – Dr. Anne Meade](#)

[Digital portfolios and the Reggio Emilia approach](#)

[How to get the most out of your study tour to Reggio Emilia](#)

[The digital space as a Piazza of participation](#)

[Documentation and the image of the child through a Reggio lens](#)

