

# Introduction to the Schools of Reggio Emilia

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Young children, their care, and their education have long been a public concern at various levels of Italian society. What families have obtained was not easy to achieve; it came from a great deal of effort and political involvement. Workers, educators, and especially women were active and effective advocates of the legislation that established public preschools in 1968 and infant/toddler centers in 1971. The results of the effort by all these determined people are publicly funded municipal as well as national programs for young children that combine the concept of social services with education. Both education and care are considered necessary to provide high quality, full-day experiences for young children.

In Italy now, preschools, whether municipal, national or private, serve about 95 percent of the children between the ages of three and six. Although the quantity of infant/toddler programs has been lower, the quality of these services in those municipalities that have invested seriously in them has been generally outstanding.

What, then, is so special about Reggio Emilia, a city of 140,000 inhabitants in northern Italy?

First of all, the city-run educational system for young children originated there in schools started by parents; literally groups of parents built them with their own hands at the end of World War II. The first school was built with proceeds from the sale of a tank, some trucks, and a few horses left behind by the retreating German army. Such participation by parents has all along remained an essential part of the way of working on education in that city.

Secondly, right from the start Loris Malaguzzi, then a young teacher, guided and directed the energies of those parents, later preparing teachers and becoming an educational leader not just in his hometown but also on the national scene.

Third, the tradition of cooperative work is firmly rooted in the Emilia Romagna region and is based on a sense of community and of solidarity. Through a strong sense of solidarity, people there are accustomed to construct and maintain the connections with the community. They typically respond to immediate, usually material needs, by forming cooperatives. Yet the spirit of cooperation that they engendered in such endeavors tends to transcend those needs to leave enduring marks upon the culture of their region.

## Values and Principles of the Reggio Emilia

What are the distinguishing features of the education of young children with regard to theory and practice that have made the Reggio Emilia approach so notable?

An examination of the features of this philosophy soon reveals that the educators have been serious readers of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, David Hawkins, Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner, and other world-renowned scientists and philosophers. In fact, Reggio Emilia educators have continued to keep abreast of the latest research in child development and education in other countries. At the same time, though, they continue to formulate new interpretations and new hypotheses and ideas about learning and teaching through their daily observations and practice of learning along with the children.

**The image of the child.** All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity; they have interest in relationship, in constructing their own learning, and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them. Children should be considered as active citizens with rights, as contributing members, with their families, of their local community. Children with special rights (rather than using the term special needs) have precedence in becoming part of an infant/toddler center or a preschool.

**Children's relationships and interactions within a system.** Education has to focus on each child, not considered in isolation, but seen in relation with the family, with other children, with the teachers, with the environment of the school, with the community, and with the wider society. Each school is viewed as a system in which all these relationships, which are all interconnected and reciprocal, are activated and supported.

**The role of parents.** Parents are an essential component of the program—a competent and active part of their children's learning experience. They are not considered consumers but co-responsible partners. Their right to participation is expected and supported; it takes many forms and can help ensure the welfare of all children in the program.

**The role of space: amiable schools.** The infant/toddler centers and preschools convey many messages, of which the most immediate is: this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and the instructive power of space. The layout of physical space fosters encounters, communication, and relationships. Children learn a great deal in exchanges and negotiations with their peers; therefore teachers organize spaces that support the engagement of small groups.

**Teachers and children as partners in learning.**

A strong image of the child has to correspond to a strong image of the teacher. Teachers are not considered protective babysitters, teaching basic skills to children but, rather, they are seen as learners along with the children. They are supported, valued for their experience and their ideas, and seen as researchers. Cooperation at all levels in the schools is the powerful mode of working that makes possible the achievement of the complex goals that Reggio educators have set for themselves.

**Not a pre-set curriculum but a process of inviting and sustaining learning.**

Once teachers have prepared an environment rich in materials and possibilities, they observe and listen to the children in order to know how to proceed with their work. Teachers use the understanding they gain thereby to act as a resource for them. They ask questions and thus discover the children's ideas, hypotheses, and theories. They see learning not as a linear process but as a spiral progression and consider themselves to be partners in this process of learning. After observing children in action, they compare, discuss, and interpret together with other teachers their observations, recorded in different ways, to leave traces of what has been observed. They use their interpretations and discussions to make choices that they share with the children.

**The power of documentation.** Transcriptions of children's remarks and discussions, photographs of their activity, and representations of their thinking and learning are carefully studied.

These documents have several functions. Most importantly, they help to determine the direction in which the work and experiences with the children will go. Once these documents are organized and displayed, they help to make parents aware of their children's experience and maintain their involvement. They make it possible for teachers to understand the children better and to evaluate the teachers' own work, thus promoting their professional growth; they make children aware that their effort is valued; and furthermore, they create an archive that traces the history of the school.

**The many languages of children.** *Atelierista* and atelier. A teacher with a background in the visual arts works closely with the other teachers and the children in every preprimary school and visits the infant/toddler centers. This teacher, who works in a special workshop or studio known as an atelier, is called an *atelierista*. The atelier contains a great variety of tools and resource materials, along with records of past projects and experiences. What is done with materials and media is not regarded as art per se, because in the view of Reggio educators the children's use of many media is not a separate part of the curriculum but an inseparable, integral part of the whole cognitive/symbolic expression involved in the process of learning.



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Through time, the materials and work of the atelier has entered into all the classrooms through the setting up of “mini-ateliers,” as teachers and *atelierista* learn to work in very connected ways.

**Projects.** Projects provide the narrative and structure to the children’s and teachers’ learning experiences. They are based on the strong conviction that learning by doing is of great importance and that to discuss in groups and to revisit ideas and experiences is essential to gain better understanding and to learn. Projects may start either from a chance event, an idea or a problem posed by one or more children, or an experience initiated directly by teachers. They can last from a few days to several months.

Educators in Reggio Emilia have no intention of suggesting that their program should be looked at as a model to be copied in other countries; rather, they consider their work as an educational experience that consists of reflection on theory, practice, and further careful reflection in a program that is continuously renewed and readjusted. Considering the enormous interest that educators show in the work done in the Reggio schools, they suggest that teachers and parents in each school, any school, anywhere, could in their own context reflect on these ideas, keeping in focus always the relationships and learning that are in process locally to examine needs and strengths, thus finding possible ways to construct change.<sup>2</sup>