

ADAPTING TO CHANGE: CAN THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH HELP WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW QUEBEC CURRICULUM?

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ABSTRACT. Educators in Quebec are faced with implementation of a curriculum reform, which places particular emphasis on young children's learning. One of the most highly regarded approaches to early childhood education is the Reggio Emilia approach, which began in Italy after the Second World War. Documentation of the success of this approach reveals imaginative and creative work produced by three-, four- and five-year-old children. The Reggio Emilia approach has significant similarities to the new Quebec curriculum. These include building on children's previous experiences; allowing children to set goals for themselves and decide on choice of projects; and drawing on a variety of 'languages' to represent children's ideas (e.g. artistic, verbal, or symbolic). In this article, we explore three relevant components of the Reggio Emilia approach which could assist in the implementation of the new Quebec curriculum: 1) the environment, 2) project-based learning, and 3) documentation.

AJUSTEMENT AU CHANGEMENT : LA DÉMARCHE DE REGGIO EMILIA PEUT-ELLE CONTRIBUER À LA MISE EN ŒUVRE DU NOUVEAU CURSUS DU QUÉBEC?

RÉSUMÉ. Les éducatrices du Québec sont tenues de mettre en œuvre une réforme du programme scolaire qui attache plus d'importance à l'apprentissage des jeunes enfants. L'une des méthodes d'enseignement préscolaire particulièrement prisées est la méthode de Reggio Emilia, qui a débuté en Italie après la Deuxième guerre mondiale. Le succès de cette méthode est attesté par des œuvres imaginatives et créatives conçues par des enfants de trois, quatre et cinq ans. Il existe des similitudes entre la méthode de Reggio Emilia et le nouveau programme du Québec. Entre autres, les deux s'inspirent des expériences préalables des enfants; elles permettent aux enfants de se fixer des objectifs pour eux-mêmes et de décider des projets qu'ils entendent réaliser; et elles s'inspirent d'une diversité de « langages » pour représenter les idées des enfants (par ex. le langage artistique, verbal ou symbolique). Dans cet article, nous étudions trois composantes de la méthode de Reggio Emilia susceptibles d'aider à la mise en œuvre du nouveau cursus du Québec : 1) l'environnement; 2) l'apprentissage axé sur des projets; et 3) la documentation.

Our knowledge of, and interest in, the Reggio Emilia Approach came about through first-hand experiences. One of these experiences was a visit to an art exhibit which displayed the work of four- and five-year-old children in a school in Western Australia. Another was viewing the imaginative, creative work produced by three-year-old children in a preschool cooperative in the United States where the Reggio Emilia approach to learning was being implemented. Seeing the fine work of these children, we questioned its authenticity. Did these very young children really produce this calibre of work? If so, how can other children be encouraged to do the same? Other educators, such as Palestis (1994), asked the same questions when first presented with the work produced by children in Reggio Emilia schools. Moreover, the organizers of the Reggio Emilia exhibit, "The 100 Languages of Children" in Boston (Rankin et al., 1993) found that these type of comments were often heard when people first saw the work of children involved in learning through the Reggio Emilia approach.

Providing the best preschool education possible is the goal of Reggio Emilia schools. Changes in the Quebec education system over the past three years reflect a similar goal: introduction of full day kindergarten for five-year-old children in Quebec schools in 1998; introduction of preschool programs for four-year-olds in disadvantaged neighborhoods to be extended to all Quebec children; and a new elementary school curriculum, including preschool, unveiled for the schools of Quebec in October 1999. These developments indicate that Quebec, as a society, is placing more emphasis on preschool education.

The purpose of this article is threefold: to describe the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education and the new Quebec preschool education curriculum; to compare these two approaches; and to explore relevant aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach which could be adapted to the Quebec context. In particular, we focus on the environment; project-based learning, and documentation.

A NOTE ON THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF REGGIO EMILIA

The focus of this article is preschool education in Quebec. However, we would be remiss if we did not make transparent from the outset that we believe there is a real and applicable connection between the Reggio Emilia approach to preschool learning and education in general, in a variety of contexts and multiple levels. For example, Allen Pence, (in Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999) makes a convincing case for the general applicability of the approach to learning used by Reggio Emilia. Drawing on Reggio's basic philosophy that learners construct knowledge together and build upon experience, the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and a Canadian university

became partners in the creation of a program to meet their needs. Pence describes how the Tribal Council and the university were co-creators of knowledge in their development of the 'Generative Curriculum'. It is hardly surprising that they found the approach appropriate. Reggio Emilia views the child as competent and follows a pedagogy where complexity, diversity and uncertainty are celebrated rather than viewed as obstacles to learning. "Complex," "diverse" and "uncertain" are words that accurately describe the world of the 21st century in which we are educating children.

What is the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education?

Reggio Emilia is a highly respected preschool program developed in Northern Italy at the end of World War II. This approach is now being emulated around the world. Gandini (1993) writes,

The Reggio Emilia schools and their approach to early childhood education are not considered to be 'experimental'. These schools are part of a public system that strives to serve both the child's welfare and the social needs of families while also supporting the child's fundamental right to grow and learn in a favorable environment with peers and with caring professional adults. (p.55)

In order to understand how the Reggio Emilia approach to pedagogy differs from current and dominant modes of operating, one must start with the image of the child. Commonly held images or constructions of the young child include,

the child as knowledge and culture reproducer, a *tabula rasa* or empty vessel needing to be filled with knowledge and to be 'made ready' to learn and for school; as nature, following biologically determined and universal stages of development; as an innocent, enjoying a golden age of life, uncorrupted by the world; or as a supply factor in determining the labour force. What these ideas or constructions have in common is that they produce a 'poor child', passive, individualized and incapable. . . ." (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 7)

In contrast, Reggio Emilia educators view the child as competent. According to the founder, Loris Malaguzzi (1993), this image is of a child as having 'surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities' (p. 73) engaged in co-constructing knowledge in relation with other children and adults. In their book, *Scaffolding Children's Learning: Vygotsky and early childhood education*, Berk and Winsler (1997) discuss Vygotsky's view that learning is a shared process in which children's capabilities are recognized and respected in an environment where scaffolding from adults facilitates the young child's learning. Further, Bredekam (1993) writes that Reggio Emilia educators believe that the quality of their schools results in large part from the image of a competent child who has rights, especially the right to outstanding care and education, not just needs.

The Reggio Emilia approach is relationship-centered. From its inception, this approach has involved children, parents and teachers in developing the curriculum. The emergent curriculum evolves from the learning needs of the children, rather than the teacher's predetermined set of learning objectives. This curriculum is fostered and supported by three important aspects of the program: the environment, project-based learning, and documentation. These three facets are important, in that they have potential value for adaptation to the Quebec preschool situation. They will be discussed later in this article.

What is the new Quebec preschool education curriculum?

The changes in the Quebec education system have resulted from the work of parents, educators and politicians over the past five years. The Ministry of Education document, *Reaffirming the Mission of Our Schools (1997)*, describes the process and path taken to make the Quebec education system reflect the education reality of the 21st century.

Highlights are noted below:

- Parents, key to the process, have always been recognized in Quebec schools. However, the changes in Quebec education have gone even further to make parents equal partners in the running of schools. Each school is required to form a governing board including parents, educators and community members.
- Much more autonomy has been granted to the local level for the management of schools. Through the governing board, the school's mission is carried out in the framework of an educational project in which each school defines its own orientation and the measures it intends to take in order to implement, adopt and enrich the Quebec Education Program. (The Quebec Education Program, 2000, p. 3)
- Grade levels have been eliminated and replaced with two or three-year-cycles. At the elementary level, cycle 1 replaces grades 1 and 2; cycle two replaces grades 3 and 4; and cycle 3 replaces grades 5 and 6. At the secondary level, cycle 4 replaces secondary 1 and 2 while cycle 5 replaces secondary 3,4 and 5.
- The new Quebec education program is a competency-based approach emphasizing that students must see the relevancy in their own lives of what they are learning.

It should be noted that the reform of the Quebec education program is a work in progress with changes being made as experience necessitates.

Looking at the new Quebec preschool curriculum, one finds evidence of a child-centered philosophy with spiral learning across the curriculum and

areas of life long learning beginning in kindergarten. In the introduction to the Preschool Program, the emphasis is on developing the whole child while building on prior knowledge and experience. Therefore, the image of the child is changed in this new paradigm. As indicated earlier, Reggio Emilia is based on this image of the child. The vessel, 'the child,' is no longer seen as empty, to be filled with knowledge from a teacher.

The new Quebec preschool program describes six competencies children are expected to acquire. These are: to perform sensorimotor actions effectively in different contexts; to affirm his/her personality; to interact harmoniously with others; to communicate using the resources of language; to construct his/her understanding of the world; and, to complete projects (The Quebec Education Program, 2000, p. 79).

These competencies in the Quebec preschool program reflect many of the concepts that form the philosophy and day-to-day practices at Reggio Emilia schools. These similarities include: attention to the importance of play, children's needs and interests as guiding principles; the rate and style of a child's learning; building on previous experience; allowing children to set goals themselves and decide on projects; working in groups; developing harmonious relationships with adults and children; using conflict resolution; and, drawing on a variety of languages to represent their ideas and feelings.

Although there are similarities between the two systems, practitioners of the Reggio Emilia approach caution that theirs is not a model to be replicated, but a philosophy to be adapted. (Palestis 1994). Gandini (1993) states that

Educators in Reggio Emilia have no intention of suggesting that their program should be looked upon as a model to be copied in another country; rather, their work should be considered as an educational experience that consists of practice and careful reflection that is continuously readjusted. (p. 52)

Nonetheless, the Reggio Emilia approach seems to be a viable pathway to accomplishing the goal of helping children master the competencies of Quebec's preschool education curriculum. Three aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach; i.e., the environment, project-based learning and documentation are explored in further detail here.

Environment

The environment acts as a foundation for the construction of knowledge at Reggio Emilia schools. Environment is not restricted to the architecturally designed spaces. Attention is paid to light and space where work can be done alone or in groups. The environment encompasses all facets of the school, as well as the entire community of Reggio Emilia.

Boyd Cadwell (1997) documented case studies of how Reggio Emilia schools actually operate, in that she closely examines the roles and responsibilities of the teacher, child, and parent that facilitate the child's ability to investigate and explore the environment through many forms of creative expression. The entire community of Reggio Emilia is open to the children as a learning environment. For example, the mapping of the city of Reggio Emilia was a project engaged in by the children and documented by teachers. All facets of the environment of the Reggio Emilia schools reflect the image they hold of the child as a competent and contributing member of a community of learners.

Reggio Emilia schools reflect their own unique conditions. The learning environment created at Reggio Emilia reflects the values and culture in which it is embedded and supports project-based learning in which students easily and comfortably become engaged. Quebec educators must create their own supportive learning environment that reflects their culture and values. We can change the physical environment but, as indicated above, the environment encompasses much more. The challenge for Quebec educators is to create an environment that supports a community of learners.

Project-based learning

Project-based learning flourishes in Reggio Emilia schools. Rebecca New (1990) describes this focus as providing numerous opportunities for symbolic representation by students which can then be documented and displayed. Children are encouraged to engage in both short and often long-term projects of interest to them. In-depth learning on very ordinary subjects is valued. Timing is at the children's pace, not that of a wall clock. Project learning allows for the possibility of children developing questions, deepening inquiry and increasing their curiosity to learn. Projects are embarked upon in a variety of ways. Some are due to children's encounters with the environment; others are based on mutual interest shown by children and teachers. Projects can also be initiated based on a perceived learning need or specific cognitive concept on the part of the teacher. This type of project learning requires group work, which can provide the opportunities for shared problem-solving and conflict resolution. Through project work, children produce "art" that astounds most viewers and reflects the creative, communicative and intellectual potential of young children. This is what Malaguzzi (1993) is describing when he uses the term "100 languages." The book, *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993), traces the history and success of this approach. These many varied symbolic representations express the tremendous capacity of children to produce superior quality work which teachers then document in their discussions with children.

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of work done by the children in Marguerite Santopietro's cooperative preschool. Figure 1 shows that every child's work is basically the same, while Figure 2 clearly demonstrates the influence of Reggio Emilia as it expresses the potential for "100 languages."

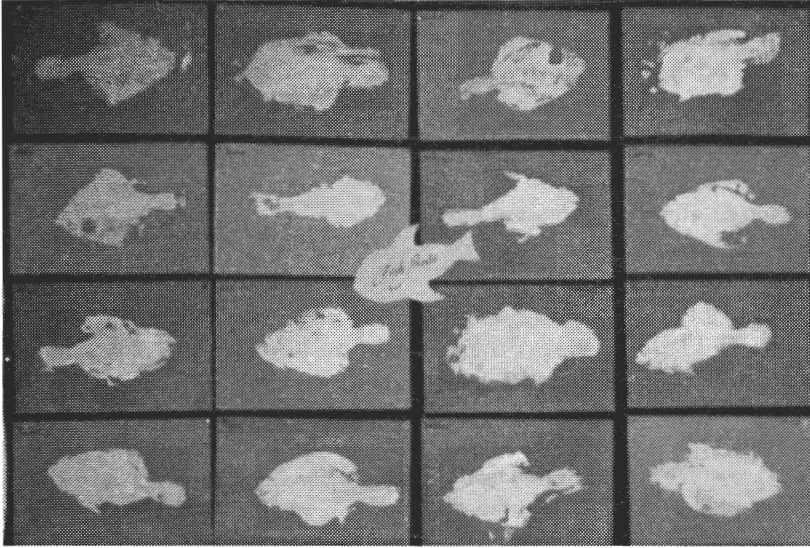


FIGURE 1. Before Reggio



A VARIETY OF INSECTS – IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

FIGURE 2. After Reggio

These pictures reveal that the children's freedom to choose form, colour, shape and size led to an explosion of creativity and individuality. This is even more visible in the full-colour originals of these photographs, which reveal a brilliant range of red, blue, yellow, green and multicoloured insects. Although the "Before Reggio" work is simple and pleasing in its way, the "After Reggio" work has obviously contributed infinitely more to each child's learning, self-esteem, and awareness. Uniformity is replaced by diversity; a teacher-initiated activity is replaced by a student-led, complex artistic production, which can then be reflected upon and used as a base for further creative experiments.

Project-based learning also fosters documentation, the third key element of Reggio Emilia to be discussed here.

Documentation

Documentation is the creation of meaning from what children do, say and think. This tells the story of the success of the Reggio Emilia approach and is not to be confused with the common understanding of 'child observation' where children are observed as a method of determining their status on the 'normal' scale. Curtis and Carter (2000) discuss the necessity to become a keen observer of children. They affirm that careful observation can transform teaching. Becoming more aware of children's way of learning allows teachers to document the children's classroom experiences more accurately. At Reggio Emilia they have moved beyond initial understanding of observation and documentation of activities to seeing it as the process of co-constructing knowledge found in concrete experience. (Kvale, 1992). This describes the connection made between authentic learning and authentic assessment.

Pedagogical documentation is a process of visualization (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999), a social construction where choices are made about what to document. This means that the teacher who is documenting is a co-constructor participant in attempting to understand children and how they learn.

Pedagogical documentation at Reggio Emilia involves content and process (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). The content concerns what the children are saying and doing, the work children are producing, and the relation between the teacher and the child. This content can be obtained in many different ways including notes, audio-video recordings and photographs, to name a few. The process involves the use of documented material in order to reflect upon the pedagogical work and to create meaning from it. As Steedman reaffirms (1991), meaning is produced through acts of interpretation and reflection. What and how one documents reflect choices and cannot be limited to one interpretation or one meaning. At Reggio Emilia,

this reflection is done in a rigorous and systematic manner and involves teachers, other educators, parents, children and many others. Katz and Chard (1996) examined documentation done at Reggio Emilia and found it exceptional in its contribution to learning.

This method of documentation requires a shift of paradigm for Quebec teachers. Through self-reflection, our socially constructed images of ourselves as teachers, children and learners become more apparent and thus, change becomes a possibility. However, unless we as educators become conscious of these mental images, change cannot occur. The Quebec Ministry of Education, through its present Reform, offers encouragement for change brought about through reflection and dialogue. This change is not restricted to preschool education but can and should be applied to all learning as a way to support this paradigm shift.

All three elements discussed above: the environment, project-based learning and documentation, which are cornerstones in the Reggio Emilia approach, offer possibilities for implementation of the new Quebec preschool program and deserve consideration for wider application in our education system.

CONCLUSION

The philosophical underpinnings of Reggio Emilia emanate from the greatest academics and educators of the past 100 years, including Piaget (1955), Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (1978), and Gardner (1983). These same educators have influenced the development of the education system in North America, including Quebec.

The new emphasis on early childhood education in Quebec reflects a shift in the area of preschool education. This new emphasis “mirrors” what has been the goal of Reggio Emilia schools for many years. For this reason, studying the Reggio Emilia approach and in particular, focusing on the three aspects addressed here, i.e., the environment, project learning, and extensive documentation in the classroom, offers potential benefits for the successful implementation of the new Quebec curriculum starting with preschool.

Success for all is the underlying goal of the new reform in Quebec education. Quality early childhood education programs contribute to overall school success. The steps already taken in Quebec, namely: full time kindergarten for all five-year-old children, the gradual implementation of preschool for four-year-olds and the new preschool curriculum, reflect a commitment to early childhood education. The similarities between the Reggio Emilia approach and the new Quebec preschool curriculum have been noted. The Reggio Emilia approach has been studied by educators across the world and is acknowledged to be very successful.

Adapting the three aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach described in this article appears to be a reasonable goal here in Quebec. It is, however, a goal that will require time, energy, resourcefulness and commitment. The concept of the learning environment must be broadened beyond the classroom. This would facilitate implementing project-based learning, which is a required competency in the new curriculum. Pedagogical documentation, as carried out in Reggio Emilia schools, supports the social-constructivist philosophy advocated by the Quebec reform. Through reflection on and dialogue about this documentation, educators can develop a deeper understanding of how children learn. The image of the child as being competent must be the first step. We believe preschool is the place to start and the Reggio Emilia approach can help to chart the path.

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