

The Reggio Emilia Approach

within the context of a middle schooling philosophy



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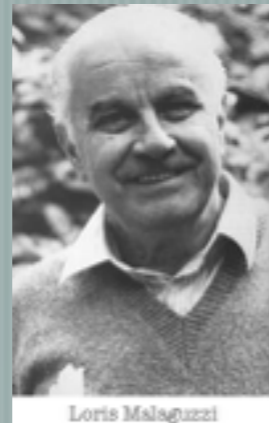
PURPOSE:

The purpose of this study was to find out more about the Reggio Emilia approach to education and how aspects of this particular philosophy might align with a middle years of schooling teaching and learning philosophy.

The Reggio Emilia approach to teaching and learning is based on core principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum. This philosophy seems to align well with the vision of our NZ Curriculum; to develop confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners.

Typically, the Reggio Emilia approach is applied to preschool or early childhood settings. Therefore, one might wonder how this would align to a middle schooling philosophy; the answer to this was found through gaining an understanding of the core principles and the pedagogical approach which places the student in the “driving seat” of their learning. Along with a group of Principal colleagues in Manurewa, I was fortunate to join the Reggio Emilia Study Tour in 2014 to learn more about this approach.

Background: The Reggio Story



BACKGROUND:

Reggio Emilia is a prosperous town in the hills of northern Italy, rich in culture and famous for its vintage basil vinegars, Parmigiano cheese, and Lambrusco wine. But it is also home to a programme of early childhood education that has gained international repute in the last quarter century. The Reggio preschools are available to children from birth to six regardless of economic circumstance or physical disability, and continue successfully to this day.

Post World War 2, across the region, there was a desire to bring change and create a new, more just world, free from oppression. It was believed that the education of children was the key to ensuring that persecution of people because of their race in the future. Led by Loris Malaguzzi, 8 self managed preschools were set up and run by the Italian Women's Union; the program was based on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum. This continues today.

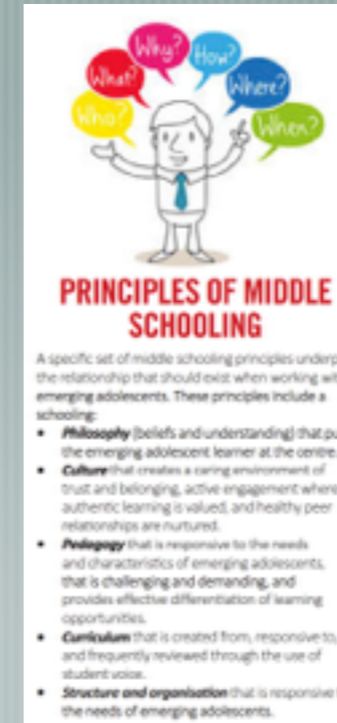
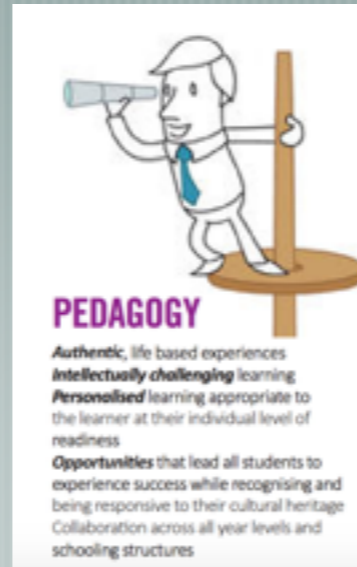
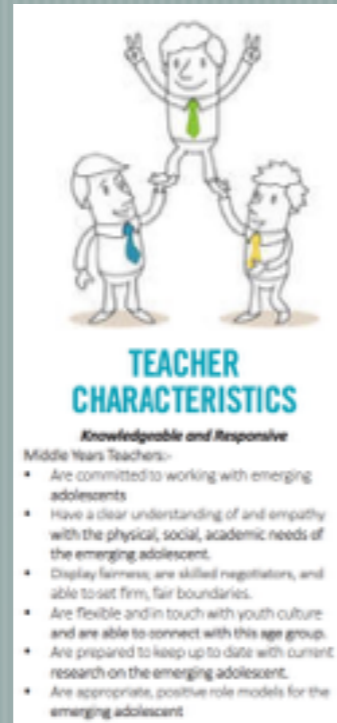
Once a week Malaguzzi would take "open schools" to the city centre. He would set up activities to show the people and promote the approach. The people would see happy children.

The RE municipality began funding the preschools in 1963, but it was in the 70's that the greatest development of preschools education took place including the city council approval of a "rule book" that detailed the features of the Reggio Emilia approach that is followed by all preschools today.

In the early 80's, the municipality began to form partnerships with other organisations to form the mixed system of municipal, state and private preschools they have today – all following the same approach.

Today, 86% of all children 3 – 6 year olds attend preschool in Reggio Emilia. It costs on average, a monthly fee of 142 euro (NZ\$224) for families.

Background: Middle School Philosophy



NZ researchers have identified seven core developmental needs which distinguish emerging adolescence from other developmental stages. These include:

- a sense of competency as a developing adult
- self-exploration and definition
- supportive social interaction with peers and adults
- challenging and rewarding physical activity
- meaningful participation in school and and community
- routines, limits and structure and
- diversity of experience

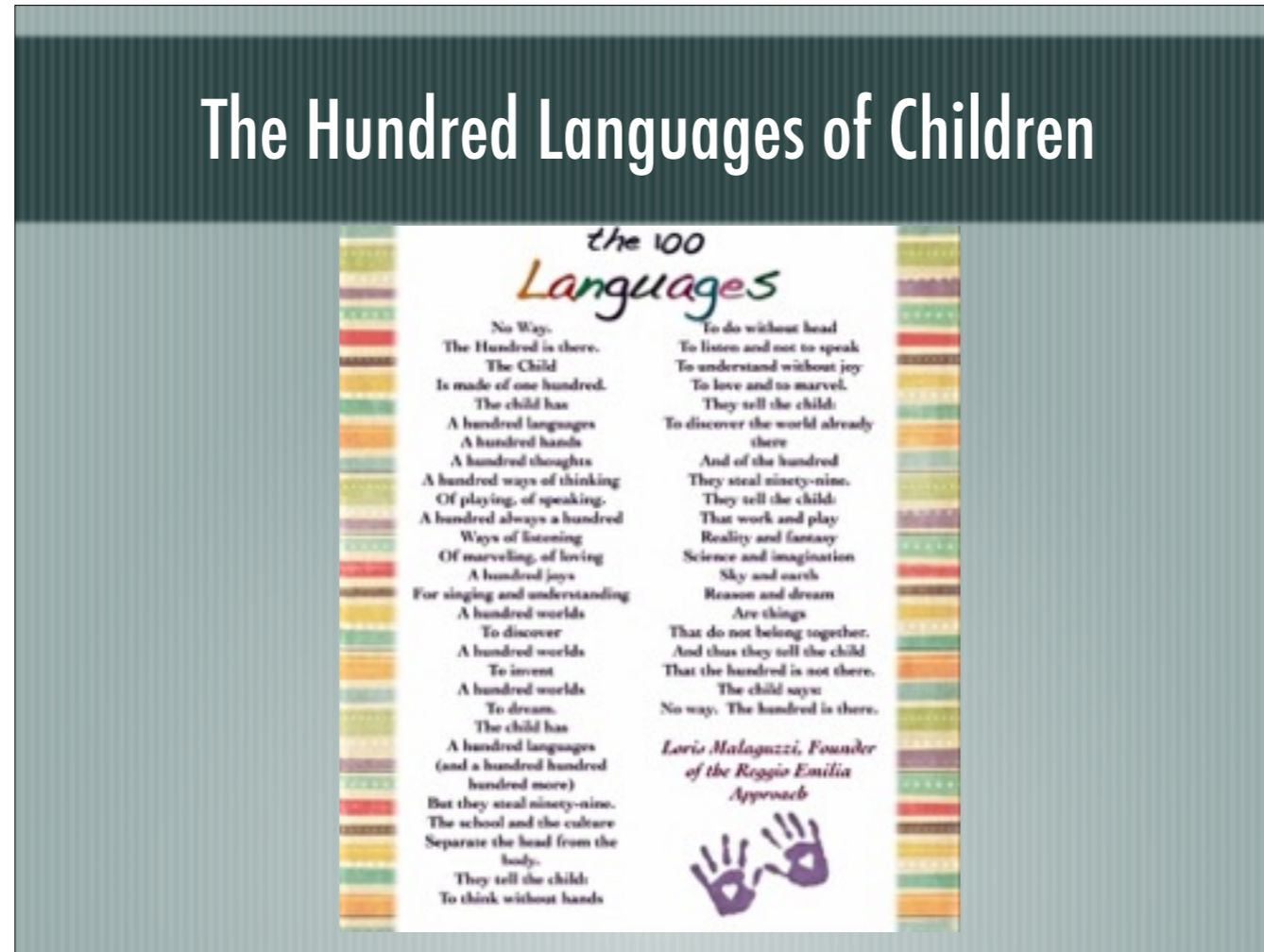
Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) describe four interrelated pedagogical approaches that promote learning and achievement in the middle school years which include:

- nurturing trusting relationships
- engaging students in fun activities
- making learning meaningful
- enabling students to learn better and helping them take responsibility for their learning.

The importance of being proactive in involving parents as partners with the school to support the development of the emerging adolescent is also identified as a vital component.

I observed many commonalities within the Reggio Emilia approach to preschool education.

The Hundred Languages of Children



The Reggio Emilia approach is based on the premise that children have “100 languages” which they use to express themselves. This poem challenges teachers and schools to ensure the creation of opportunities for children to be able to express themselves in a multitude of ways. Teachers in Reggio Emilia are really deliberate in the way they encourage children to express themselves – they are “sensitive to the moment”, they are “inspired listeners” and “encouragers of discovery”.

This aligns well with our NZ Curriculum vision to develop confident, connected, active lifelong learners and are key qualities of entrepreneurial learners. The strong emphasis that their curriculum placed on visual and oral language was evident; this led me to reconsider the intense focus placed in NZ on Reading, Writing and Mathematics as we work to accelerate the progress of underachieving students.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

- * There is a common approach across all centres. Centres are dedicated to developing the potential and rights of everyone, regardless of their surrounding circumstances.
- * Children stay with the same teacher for 3 years.
- * Children are encouraged to dialogue, critique, compare, negotiate, hypothesise and problem solve through groupwork and through working on a variety of fun and innovative “projects”.



The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based upon the following set of principles:

- Children must have some control over the direction of their learning;
- Children must be able to learn through experiences of touching, moving, listening, seeing, and hearing;
- Children have a relationship with other children and with material items in the world that children must be allowed to explore and
- Children must have endless ways and opportunities to express themselves.

The Reggio Emilia approach to teaching young children puts the natural development of children as well as the close relationships that they share with their environment at the centre of its philosophy. Pre schools “cluster” into groups and share a “pedagogista” whose role it is to ensure consistency of approach and teacher practice across schools.

These “projects” (this is a direct translation, we would call them inquiries) the children work on are concrete, important to them and of interest to them. While they emerge from children’s ideas; they can be provoked by the teacher; they can also derive from what the teachers know is of interest to the children.

The learning is very authentic. Rainbows, weather, sunlight, city life, frogs, bicycles – everyday subjects rather than the remote or academic ones provide the means of discovery.

The teacher is a researcher, along with the children.

Students are more actively engaged when learning is perceived to be fun, inspiring and challenging (Brown et al, 2009). To the young adolescent, fun means variety, novelty and a sense of adventure, as well as the use of age-appropriate humour and laughter. Learning needs to be viewed from a students perspective and the teachers role as a facilitator is to guide this learning in the right direction. Inquiry was embedded in the learning from the earliest age in Reggio Emilia preschools. I could not help but feel this embedded focus on inquiry was the key to their high levels of achievement and their ability to work collaboratively with each other. Few students worked in isolation — most students worked in highly flexible groups.

Parents as the “First Teacher”



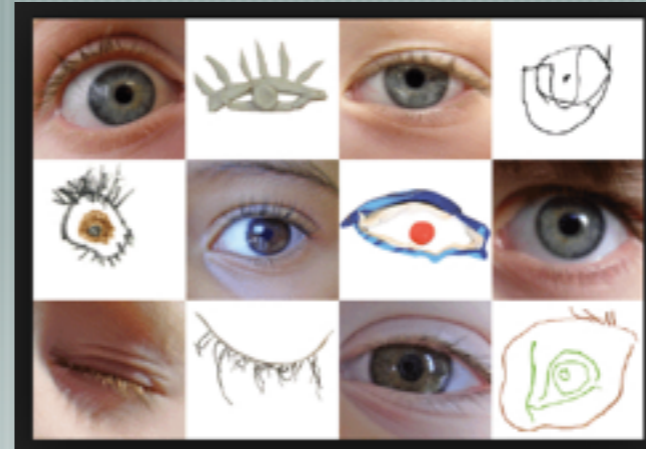
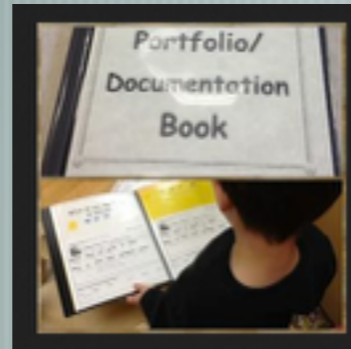
- Parents are valued as partners, collaborators and advocates for their child.
- They are expected to be involved in school decision making and are kept thoroughly up to date on children’s progress through extensive documentation of the child’s learning journey.
- Because most parents work, all meetings are held in the evenings.

Parents of students enrolled in RE preschools are valued as equal partners in their child’s education and they are very clear about what is expected of them and what they can expect from the organisation. They have a strong “voice” and their input is an integral part of curriculum planning.

Effective intermediates and middle schools need to be proactive about involving parents as partners in their child’s learning journal while at the same time the students themselves are wanting greater independence and less interaction between their parents and the school.

Teachers as the “Second Teacher”

- How teachers listen to, and observe the children is important to success.
- Teachers facilitate learning by planning activities based on the child’s interests.
- Careful attention is paid to the documentation and presentation of the thinking of children. (daily)



- Teachers have a long term commitment to enhancing their understanding of children.
- Extensive professional development is provided.
- Every centre has an “artelierista” (professional artist) as a standard member of staff.

Teachers are highly valued in Reggio Emilia for their expertise; to teach is to influence. They are held in the highest regard. There is an expectation that teachers will work long hours, are open to learning and constantly inquiring into their own practice.

Teachers of the Reggio Emilia preschools had a deep understanding of child development and this underpinned their teaching practice. Teachers of the middle years also require a deep understanding of the development changes taking place during adolescent; this is a period of great change for the child and specialists of this age group need to know and understand well the needs of this age level.

The teachers I observed were all skilled facilitators of learning. Interestingly, there was not a huge emphasis on digital learning, although all centres had computers and technology available. There was a strong emphasis on creativity and particularly The Arts. Every centre employed a full time professional artist (artelierista) who taught art to students – the level of observational drawings was outstanding for such young students. From a very early age, students were taught how to observe carefully and create detailed drawings of what they saw. From these drawings, they would move into creating 3D pieces of art that were equally creative and detailed.

Extensive professional development is provided – there is an expectation that all teachers will work collaboratively with others to critique their practices and share their inquiries. The Loris Malaguzzi International Centre plays a central role in this as the centre–point for the international “Reggio Children” network; providing professional learning and developing, publishing inquiries and promoting the approach world wide. The “pedogistas” who are shared between centres to lead PD also provide a key role in the development of a common language of learning and approach.

The environment as the “Third Teacher”



- The environment is set up so children can be in charge of their own learning and play independently. It encourages them to explore and investigate.
- The layout of a typical school echoes that of the city.
- Central indoor piazza or common area (representing the typical traditional town square).
- Classrooms and kitchen/dining area open directly off the piazza.
- Every centre includes an atelier (art studio) and often mini ateliers (art corners).

These physical environments were not all modern. There were only two purpose built facilities, the others had been adapted from the early 60's. They all followed a similar design that reflected the formation of the city. There was a common central area (called the piazza) which signified the town square, common in Italian cities. All other areas opened directly off these central areas.

I was reminded of the current shifts into “modern learning environments” and indeed, it was a bit of a flash back to the open plan school designs prevalent in the 70's and 80's. To me the stark difference between the designs of that era in NZ and the designs of the RE preschools was that in Reggio Emilia it was their educative philosophy that drove the design of the buildings not the other way around.

The indoor environment.....

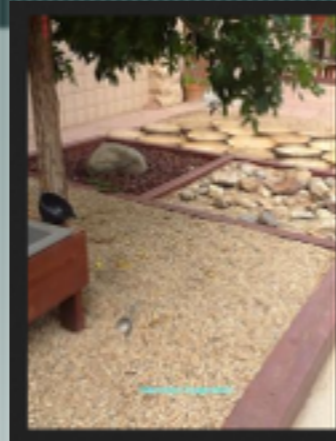


- [Marked use of natural and artificial light
- [Floor to ceiling windows
- [Pale walls to offset the artwork
- [Lots of mirrors
- [Lots of different kinds of lighting for varied effects (a lot could be moved around)
- [The welcome area is significant; low windows, couches,
- [Everything in classrooms is sorted and highly organised into colours, shapes and sizes.

Reggio inspired classrooms aim to create a nurturing, warm, homelike environment. There was a strong emphasis on light and nature and lots of use of mirrors to reflect light. Great attention is paid to the “look and feel” of the classroom and often photographs of students were used to reinforce the notion that “this is your space, your place”

In some ways there are similarities with NZ’s shift towards innovative learning spaces to support flexible learning environments. All preschools had spaces for quiet individual reflection, spaces for collaboration and talk, central areas for large group discussions, great lighting and indoor/outdoor flow.

The Outdoor Environment....



- [Clever design of indoor, outdoor flow.
- [Exploration of nature is a key focus of the curriculum.
- [Lots of plants, twigs, leaves etc are bought indoors

Indoor/outdoor flow was key as was the use of light. The outdoor environments however, were not particularly appealing in contrast to outdoor environments common in NZ. Exploration of nature is a key part of their curriculum, so there was a very natural “look and feel” to the outdoor environments we visited.

What did it make me think about back in NZ?

- | Communities of schools working together
- | Absolute respect for children and their abilities - no matter where they come from or their backgrounds - all children have unlimited potential.
- | Lots of focus at the moment on Modern Learning Environments - the RE approach gave us much to think in this area. What is our starting point for designing MLE's? Do schools start with their philosophy of learning and then design the environment to support that?
- | How DELIBERATE are we in designing opportunities for students at all year levels to observe, explore, create, design, investigate, research, largely by themselves? With a teacher working in partnership alongside them.
- | The importance of teachers as learners - engaging in a process of inquiry, encountering the world with the same curiosity, interest, wonder and amazement as the children they teach.
- | WHO or WHAT drives the learning students are engaged in - how much choice or say do students have in their inquiries and the activities they are engaging in? How authentic is their learning? How interested in it are they? How are we fostering curiosity in our children?

These schools worked together for the collective good of the community and city. They believed that everything they did had to lead to the development of “good citizens”. This is something I admired.

What did it make us think about in relation to Learners with Special needs?

- { How much importance do we place on getting to know the child holistically.
- { How well do we adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of ALL students including those who have special needs? There were no withdrawal “programmes” - the learning was highly inclusive.
- { How well do we make use of parents as the first, the teacher as the second, and the environment as the third teacher?
- { What processes are in place to ensure the school fits the child, rather than expecting the child to fit the school?

These preschools were incredibly inclusive. Students with special needs and disabilities were embraced and the curriculum was individually adapted to meet their needs. Teacher aide support was provided for these students – most had a support worker guiding them in the classroom. They worked collaboratively with the students as much as everyone else. It was impressive and something I feel we should all aspire to here in NZ.