

# **Sabbatical Inquiry**

**Term 2 2009**

**Ways to enhance the development and implementation of our  
“Rolly Express” Inquiry Model at the Junior level with particular  
reference to the work of preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy.**

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## Acknowledgements

The recommendation that a principal on sabbatical should spend 50% of their time on their chosen study proposal, and the remaining 50% on “reflection and refreshment” is enlightened and gives Principals the freedom to step away from the busyness of their schools and to see them from a different perspective which cannot be achieved while leading them on a daily basis.

After 16 consecutive years of school principal ship, this sabbatical will offered me substantial personal and professional benefits.

My current school is the fastest growing school in the South Island, and one of only three growing at this rate in New Zealand. Often, the day to day demands of leading and managing this school, and the need to attend to the immediate needs of children, staff and parents prevent me from spending quality time thinking through, reading about and reflecting on curriculum and pedagogical issues at a deeper level.

The opportunity to visit schools and preschools, engage with other principals in discussions about innovative practices, share and reflect on my own experiences and practices, view programmes in action, and investigate and research inquiry learning for junior students has enhanced my own professional leadership practice and, will in turn, inform and enhance that of my school leadership team and our teachers.

I would like to express my gratitude for the support offered to me by the Board of Trustees of Rolleston School which enabled me to accept this special opportunity.

I would also like to thank the many people who provided access to their schools, and time to answer my questions including :

- The Staff of Rivieri Infant Toddler Centre – Reggio Emilia, Italy
- The staff of Girotondo Infant Toddler / Preschool - Reggio Emilia, Italy
- The staff of Panda Preschool - Reggio Emilia, Italy
- Glenys Waller – Senior Teacher Junior School, St Cuthbert’s College, Auckland
- Liz Battersby – Associate Principal, Head of Junior School, St Cuthbert’s College, Auckland
- Lis Lewis and Felecia Tomich – Teachers, St Cuthbert’s College, Auckland
- Clive Hoskin - Invanhoe School – Melbourne, Australia

And finally, but by no means least; thanks to my wonderful staff at Rolleston School. To Chris and Team Rata for the ChiL Time initiative (you’re Reggio inspired already!), and to everyone else on our special team at Rolleston for keeping things running so smoothly in my absence and allowing me this special time away.

## Purpose

My idea for this project began when I was trying to answer questions raised during professional discussions at my school during the implementation of our “Rolly Express” Inquiry Model at the Junior level of the school.

The questions raised were mainly around three key areas :

- the transition to school for NE 5 year olds and how to manage this “better”, especially for some boys who find the change from the relative “freedom” of pre-school to the often more “formal” structure of primary school, sometimes difficult to manage.
- the feedback from some teachers in our Junior Team who were finding involving children in inquiry learning challenging
- the possibility of moving the Junior team to a new site location, with a view to developing a more 5 year old friendly environment, similar perhaps to kindergartens, which might ease transition to school

It should be noted that this was not a clinically designed research project. The format of this commentary is therefore of a more informal nature. It is a **collection of ideas** and **impressions** resulting from visits and conversations with many different groups. It is also a set of **reflections** on how these ideas might better serve the needs of our children at Rolleston and the **challenges** associated with implementing them within a New Zealand context.

I chose to explore these ideas in several ways.

1. Readings with a focus principally on current literature from Italy and America including “*Teaching and Learning: Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach.*” Upper Saddle River, NJ. V. R., Stremmel, A. J., Hill, L. T. (Eds.) (2002). and “*The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach*” Advanced Reflections. Editors : [Edwards](#) , [Gandini](#) and [Forman](#)
2. Attendance at a conference hosted by *Reggio Children* in Reggio Emilia, Italy.
3. Visits and professional discussions with educators in Italian, Australian and New Zealand settings where the Reggio model is being used. These included : St Cuthbert’s College – Auckland, Rivieri Infant Toddler Centre, Girotondo Infant Toddler / Preschool and Panda Preschool – Reggio Emilia, Italy and Ivanhoe School, Melbourne, Australia.

## **Rationale & Background Information**

### ***Why Reggio?***

The Reggio philosophy is world renowned for its innovative approaches to learning and its inclusion of the community and parents within the school setting. As a school embarking on the use of an inquiry model for our students it was useful for us to consider the Reggio model with particular reference to the work with our NE and Y1 students.

I was impressed to read of the work being done with 3-6 year olds in the Reggio schools. It appeared that children exposed to a model where they work normally in groups and are seen as competent thinkers about their world with a profound interest in, and many theories about things around them, made great strides in developing their understanding of the world, their place in it and how to work with others effectively. Like all schools these were skills and understandings which we wanted our children to develop and so further investigation was warranted.

My initial readings of articles by educational professionals were, to say the least, intriguing. The more I read, the more I realised that there were, inherent in the pedagogy of the Reggio Emilia schools, a number of useful ideas and practices which could help address many of the things which we had been discussing at Rolleston.

While I was very excited about the prospect of this, I was also very conscious of the comments made by Howard Gardner that, it would be foolhardy to think that any school or community could simply “transplant” the Reggio pedagogy into their environment. Rather, they would have to adapt what they saw as useful in the Reggio model, to fit their unique communities and circumstances.

### ***What is Reggio pedagogy?***

The Reggio Emilia approach is specific to the municipality of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. The methods used there, which are respected world-wide, are not followed to the same extent in other areas of Italy, or indeed by all the preschools in the municipality itself.

The current schools have built on the traditions and history of self-managed schools opened after WW2, and later schools developed by women’s organisations. There was a good deal of political struggle involved in the development of these schools which, because of their secular nature, were seen to be in direct “opposition” to the Catholic dominated education system of the time. So successful were they that the municipality in time felt obliged to support and sustain their on-going survival.

The educators, families and children have fought many battles over the years as national government tried to transfer the schools into the state preschool system. With radio stations claiming the schools were “anti religious” and “anti clerical” the local community opened their doors to a spirited debate which saw Reggio established as an independent municipal education system in its own right.

The pedagogy followed by the teachers is based on the belief that children, even very young ones, have an inherent curiosity in, and understanding of their world. They also have many ideas (theories) about their world and how it works. They require the opportunity to develop this understanding, to test their theories and construct new meaning from what they see and encounter in their lives.

The *pedagogy of listening* lies at the heart of the teaching in Reggio.

Listening in this sense is a metaphor for sensitivity. It is being attentive to the questions raised by children in their thinking, refraining from “teaching” too much, respecting the child’s right to make sense in their own way and encouraging the continuing curiosity. Above all it involves an unhurried approach which allows TIME for this to occur. Time is a gift given by the schools, teachers and the community to the children. Compare this with often heard conversations in New Zealand schools where “there is never enough time.”

The teacher’s responses are critical. To listen to the children with all our senses so that we can enjoy the “languages” of people, plants, the stars. To listen with our hearts and minds and to accept that we all hold points of view and none of us has a mortgage on the “truth”. This approach to working with children takes TIME and this is what the teachers in Reggio provide. They take the time to allow children the opportunity to think for themselves and construct their own meaning. They take time to allow groups to work together and co-construct meaning from their shared experiences. They are not prisoners of timetables and overcrowded curriculums. Rather the curriculum is generated from the children’s thinking and theorising.

Teachers will often present a *provocation* to the children. A provocation may be an experience or problem which will stimulate discussion and theorising by the children. Through being attentive and tuning into discussions a “*project*” will be developed as the children’s enthusiasm for a particular area or aspect becomes more obvious. Teachers work in a very fluid way allowing the children’s ideas and enthusiasm to drive the project and create new explorations around the central theme.

Within this process the children are referred to as *protagonists*. As such they come to the learning with their own views and ideas which may, or may not gel with the views of others. This of course leads to discussion, debate...argument, and hopefully new understanding / learning. The process that teachers facilitate is a very powerful experience for the children and, over time, helps the children develop a clear sense of themselves as individuals and part of a community. It enhances self esteem and self worth.

These *provocations* and *projects* require teachers to be completely tuned into the children and what’s happening in the room. It places a good deal of pressure on them to “plan” as they go. Because ideas change and new directions can often be taken, it is often impossible to determine where a project will end up. It may be completed within a week. It may take several months, depending on the enthusiasm of the children. It may be suspended and returned to several weeks or months later when an occurrence reignites the children’s interest and curiosity. This way of working with its inherent lack of preplanning and structure will be challenging for some teachers.

Another key in the pedagogy of Reggio is *making learning visible*, both within the school and in the community. The ongoing work in projects is *documented* with heavy use of ICT, especially digital cameras and video. Rooms are full of the on-going results of children’s work. This is recorded in many different ways with annotations from teachers, similar in many ways to the work done in some of our kindergartens working through the Te Whariki document, a document admired by educators in Reggio.

This *documentation* carried out by the teachers is an essential part of the programme in Reggio schools.

It serves multiple purposes.

- “It contributes to the depth of the learning gained by the children from their projects and other work.
- It makes it possible for parents to become acutely aware of their child’s experience in the school.
- It enables children to easily share their actual school experiences and not just their products.
- It is a kind of teacher research, sharpening and focusing teachers’ attention on the intentions and understandings of the children as well as their role in children’s experiences. ... deepens teachers’ awareness of each child’s progress.
- It provides information about children’s learning and progress that cannot be demonstrated by formal standardised tests and check lists... provides compelling public evidence of the intellectual powers of young children.” (Lillian G. Katz ; “What Can We Learn From Reggio Emilia?”)

Often the projects will result in children giving something to their community. It may be something as simple as a space in a park decorated with stone patterns and decorations or, in the case of one school, a set of beautiful curtains for the local theatre designed by the children. This constant giving to the community, and use of the wider community as a place to learn, encourages close ties with the schools and people of the city.

The strong historical foundations of this schooling mentioned earlier, mean that many organisations, groups and businesses support the schools and the children’s learning. Cultural groups, recycling plants, and many others work with the children during their explorations and allow access to their workplaces or special facilities. These ties enhance the community in general and help the children appreciate where they belong and to understand that they have a role to play!

These schools are not audited by any outside government agency. They rise or fall on the work they do in their community, and the value that is placed on this by parents. Parents are truly active partners in these schools.

The nature of Italian communities is I believe, stronger than that which we have in New Zealand. There is a lot of communal activity and discussion as an everyday part of life. This is reflected in the schools where families meet daily in the “piazza” (which every school has) to pass the time, talk with teachers and enjoy the visible expression of their children’s work. Parents are keenly interested in the schools and regularly attend quite long meetings to discuss issues relating to the schools and their future. The community is an essential part of the school and no significant change is made without extensive parental input.

## **Possibilities for Rolleston**

It is easy to eulogise about the municipal infant toddler schools in Reggio Emilia; to believe that they have answered all the questions.

As Howard Gardner points out : “It is tempting to romanticize Reggio Emilia. It looks so beautiful, it works so well. That would be a mistake. It is clear... that Reggio has struggled much in the past and that indeed, conflict can never be absent from the achievements of any dynamic entity. The relationships to the Catholic Church have not been easy; the political struggles at the municipal, provincial and national levels never cease, and even the wonderful start achieved by the youngsters is threatened and perhaps undermined by the secondary and tertiary education system that is far less innovative. Reggio is distinguished less by the fact that it has found permanent solutions to these problems – because of course it has not- than by the fact that it recognises such dilemmas unblinkingly and continues to attempt to deal with them seriously and imaginatively.”

It is this unflinching facing up to the challenges posed in educating children that inspires. The willingness of the *protagonists* to engage in reflective dialogue with a variety of educationalists from around the world with the aim of improving their practice is a model worthy of emulation.

Our new National Curriculum has provided schools with an outstanding opportunity to tap into some of these innovative practices. “The New Zealand Curriculum sets the direction for teaching and learning .... But it is a framework rather than a detailed plan. This means that while every school curriculum must be clearly aligned with the intent of the document, schools have considerable flexibility when determining the detail. In doing so they can draw on a wide range of ideas, resources, and models.” (NZ Curriculum p37)

From our perspective in a New Zealand State school the issues of accountability, reporting and assessing are quite different to those in Reggio Emilia. We have a national curriculum. We set school targets. We have National Standards. There is a general expectation that we will report on children’s progress in quite explicit ways.

Because of this it would be natural to expect that core areas of our curriculum would still be worked through in fairly structured ways following school programmes allowing for reporting of progress over time. It is in the areas of the Arts, Science and Social Sciences, where we are currently looking at integrated programmes and inquiry learning, that I believe there is real potential to incorporate some of the methodology from Reggio Emilia at Rolleston.

The notion of integration which Gehrke describes as : “those forms of curriculum in which student learning activities are built, less with concern for delineating disciplinary boundaries around those kinds of learning, and more with the notion of helping students recognize or create their own learning.” Sits well with the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia.

Since my return I have begun the process of sharing some of my thinking.

Our Junior school teachers have met with me to discuss some of my thoughts and ideas. We have begun reading and sharing ideas together. We have engaged in debate!

In term 4 we put a toe into the water of some of the Reggio pedagogy and trialled some *projects* so that we could continue to discuss outcomes for children and practical issues around implementation in a New Zealand setting.

The discussions between teachers, children and parents were a revelation. The level of enthusiasm and excitement generated by the projects was outstanding as our five and six year old children began exploring: feeding birds, living in space, engines and how things work and poo!

## **Implications**

In continuing to explore these ideas at Rolleston there are a number of challenges and benefits for all involved.

### **What will the benefits be for our children?**

- Their natural interest and enthusiasm for their world which they bring to school at age 5 will be enhanced and not snuffed out as it seems to be for many children by the time they are 10!

- They will be given the time to make their own sense of things rather than rushing onto the next topic.
- They will become active protagonists in their learning and through this learn from others and co-construct new meaning.
- They will see many possibilities in any situation not rote or pat answers, and because of this they will develop a richness of expression.
- They will engage with the wider community and their world.
- They will have an enhanced sense of belonging to their community.
- They will develop self confidence and be heard.
- They will learn to listen.

### **What will be the benefit for teachers?**

- They will become engaged more meaningfully with their children.
- They may abandon some traditional ways of working for one which gives respect to individuals and fosters a truly meaningful learning relationship with children at the centre.
- They will be given more time to listen to children and to make deeper interpretations of their reasoning and the processes they have followed.
- They may be freed from the need to tick boxes and instead focus on the process of learning and the personal growth of children's thinking and understanding of their world and the way they live in it.
- The comparative freedom from time pressures.
- They will tap in to wider resources within our community to support their work, engage the community and develop meaningful partnerships.

### **What will be the benefit for parents?**

- They will see their children move from a kindergarten / pre-school setting into programmes at Rolleston which will ease the transition, especially for boys.
- They will see visible evidence of their children's learning journey in the documentation done by teachers.
- They will enjoy their children's contribution to their community.

### **What are the challenges?**

- The costs of PD for staff involved initially. Many speakers from Reggio attend conferences in Australia and a few reach New Zealand.
- Ensuring that we build on the work done by Junior staff in ChiL Time and dovetailing it with useful Reggio pedagogy.
- Allowing teachers the time and freedom to explore the pedagogy without the restraints of the requirement to have pre-planned units linked to specific AO's or learning outcomes in order to work with the emergent and informal nature of the curriculum which develops.
- Assisting teachers to manage the flexible nature of the projects and supporting them to be prepared to try it.
- Being able to reconcile the content of projects with curriculum coverage so that children are not disadvantaged or missing out on important learning experiences in some areas of the curriculum.

- Ensuring that ERO and parents understand what we're doing and being able to provide evidence of its success in developing quality, thinking, learners.
- Parental education to develop understanding/acceptance of an approach which may appear to lack the structure of traditional learning, and the outcomes of which are reported differently.
- Budget to purchase resources and to redesign our Junior School environment in keeping with Reggio philosophy. This will be a major challenge as we will have to work with our current structures and re-design them creatively. The architecture of Reggio schools is an integral part of the pedagogy providing discreet places for small group work and exploration on a level not achievable in many New Zealand schools without substantial modification.
- The need to start dialogue with our local pre-school institutions to support our work and ensure that it builds on the early childhood experiences of the children coming to Rolleston.

## Conclusions

At the beginning of my sabbatical I hoped to find answers and inspiration in my study. I found inspiration, but came back with more questions than answers.

This is the nature of the Reggio experience where assumptions are challenged and beliefs scrutinised. Where there is no perfect answer, just an on-going search for better ways of enhancing the learning experiences of children.

The experiences I have had, and the links I have made with other teachers in New Zealand, have encouraged me to work with my staff to develop our own Rolleston Reggio approach within the context of our integrated curriculum and our Rolly Express inquiry model.

We will begin this work initially in the Y0/1 classes and hope to grow it into other levels over time. This will be a challenging and exciting time.

We would welcome contact from any other schools that may be embarking on similar *projects* that would care to spend some *time* in dialogue with us.

## References

1. "The Hundred Languages of Children" 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition – Edwards, Gandini, Forman
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3. "Impressions of Reggio Emilia Pre-schools" Katz, L.G
4. "Teaching and Learning – Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach" Fu, Stremmel and Hill