

# **SABBATICAL INQUIRY**

**Term 3 2015**

**To investigate how integrating aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach within a New Entrant setting could be conducive to a child's transition from pre-school to primary school.**

**Jennifer Horgan  
Principal  
East Taieri School**

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- Toni Clarke, Head Teacher, East Taieri Pre-School (Mosgiel)

## **Purpose**

- This investigation has been prompted by the ongoing consideration of the challenge facing our New Entrant teachers of ensuring that transition to school is positive and enjoyable, that children have time to develop naturally, think creatively, be inquisitive, open-minded and take risks with their learning, while at the same time acquiring the academic skills necessary for them to meet National Standards.
- At East Taieri School there has been much professional discussion around ways of balancing our own Inquiry model of teaching within the New Entrant setting, with the pressure of getting children to reach the National Standard within their first year of school. Looking at how incorporating the Reggio

Emilia approach could assist with maintaining the balance would be a major component of the investigation.

- There has also been much discussion with the neighbouring pre-school around ways to strengthen the liaison between us and in doing so, enhance children's transition to school. Investigating the benefits of incorporating aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach into both our pre-school and school setting would be a consideration of the study.
- The opportunity to visit recommended New Zealand pre-schools and schools in Christchurch and Auckland which embrace the Reggio Emilia style of education would provide evidence of the success of the approach, also an opportunity to investigate how the approach was introduced, the professional learning that took place and any challenges that were encountered.

(I was fortunate enough to visit Reggio Emilia during my sabbatical, and although I was unable to visit schools as it was holiday time, I was able to experience the city, the culture and the people.)

## **Rationale and Background Information**

The Early Childhood services and schools that are most effective in supporting children's transition to school have a strong focus on children's dispositional learning, independence and social competence, providing opportunities for children to participate in programmes that focus on extending their particular strengths and interests in authentic contexts. True partnerships in learning are developed with parents, and assessment information makes learning visible. (ERO 2015)

The Reggio Emilia approach, which has inspired many early childhood centres around the world, appears to have as central to its philosophy, the traits outlined above.

Some excellent readings have provided me with an insight into the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching and learning. This approach is based on the concept that children have many ways to develop their potential, extending their individual strengths and interests, showing their learning through the 'hundred languages' that they possess. Providing a learning environment where children are able to express themselves through many ways is central to the Reggio approach, as is building and maintaining relationships. Parents play an active part in their children's learning and the exchange of ideas between parents and teachers is highly valued.

## **History**

The Reggio Emilia approach was developed by Loris Malaguzzi and the parents of the villages around Reggio Emilia in Italy after World War Two. It was believed that at this time children needed a new way of learning and should be given multiple experiences and opportunities to develop their potential. Children were viewed as

being competent and having rights and strengths, rather than needs. Malaguzzi says that a child possesses 'a hundred languages' with which to make sense of the world and co-construct knowledge. This metaphor of the hundred languages recognises that children have infinite ways of expressing their thoughts and ideas and making sense of their world – through writing, drawing, movement, music, sculpture, and other such 'languages.' It acknowledges that learning occurs in different ways, through different styles and intelligences.

## **The Environment**

When visiting Reggio Emilia, seeing families and friends meeting in the squares or 'piazzas', the importance of the role that the 'piazza' plays in the life of the people is obvious, and this is reflected in the design of Reggio Emilia schools where spaces for encounters between children, between adults and children, and between adults are created.

The environment is seen as another teacher, inviting children to enter and participate, through displays of children's work within areas making the most of space, natural light, colour, and nature. There is great attention to layout, detail and design.

## **The Importance of Relationships**

Children, teachers and families are seen as the three components central to the education of children, based on rich relationships and participation. Great importance is placed on creating the conditions for the development of relationships and interaction.

## **The Importance of Listening and the Gift of Time**

The importance of 'listening' is central to the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, listening, not only through our ears, but through 'all our senses' (Rinaldi, 2005). Listening is seen as valuing the voice of others and as being conducive to building relationships. Teachers take the time to listen, allowing children to think for themselves, make sense of their world in their own way.

'Listening is not only a pedagogical approach, it is a different way of thinking.....Listening is time.....the best present you can give to a child is to give him/her time, your time, a time for themselves to reflect, to think, to play, to communicate.' (Rinaldi, 2005)

Time is referred to as a valued gift. Central to the Reggio approach is an attitude that values time to learn, time to research, time for interacting with one another.

## **The Role of the Teacher**

The role of the teacher is above all one of listening, observing, and understanding the strategy that children use in a learning situation.....The teacher must be involved within the child's exploring procedure. The teacher must be able to catch the ball that the children throws them and toss it back to them in a way that makes the children want to continue the game. (Filippini, 2006)

Reggio teachers believe in shared control between teachers and children. Teachers are continually researching and learning with the children. Reggio teachers facilitate learning by asking questions that lead children to deeper thinking and further research.

## **Observation and Pedagogical Documentation**

Pedagogical documentation - making learning visible, is central to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. The documentation 'is a visible form of the pedagogy of listening, and plays a fundamental role in creating a 'transparent school.' This documentation allows everyone in the school community, especially parents, to observe and interpret the process of learning. (Giamminuti, 2009)

The documentation takes many forms – wall displays, notes, photos, etc, not only showing the learning journey of children but giving them the opportunity to revisit and reflect on their learning.

Filippini (2006) suggests that the creation of documents provides a unique opportunity for teachers to listen again, to see again, and therefore revisit the experiences of children. This, in turn, produces discussion and debate amongst the teachers, this revisiting with colleagues helps to modify a teacher's thoughts and hypotheses about the children, and subsequent interactions with them.

## **Follow up to School and Pre-school Visits/Findings**

Following up on my readings, it was an absolute privilege to visit schools and pre-schools that had incorporated the Reggio philosophy into their education centres. All were clear about the fact that a true Reggio Emilia school or pre-school can only happen in Reggio Emilia in Italy. All that we can do in New Zealand is look through the Reggio lens and incorporate the philosophy into our settings as best we can. Comments from teachers who had observed teaching in Reggio Emilia focused strongly on the family/teacher relationship. One teacher stated that nothing happens without input from parents. He had been invited to a 'parent/teacher' meeting one evening. The meeting started at 9pm and finished at midnight. It wasn't just parents who attended, the whole community was involved. Families have ultimate trust in educators and together they create what is important to them for their children.

The Reggio approach is 'best practice pedagogy.' It is a philosophy that informs best practice and programmes. There is a true, authentic respect for children, with great importance placed on the development of children's self-esteem and self-worth. High importance is also given to the development of children's expressive language.

Best practice pedagogy was observed in the schools and pre-schools visited. Teachers were passionate about their role. Focused, intense listening to children was obvious. Teachers talked about the need to be able to 'listen' in many ways – through children's body language, through their art, dance, writing, etc. Observation was seen as the key. Group learning observations were documented as well as individual learning observations.

It was obvious that a responsive curriculum was needed. With the Reggio approach the end point for learning is not known. Children's learning could take many different paths. We saw evidence of the different learning journeys children had taken, where the children were engaged, co-constructing the learning alongside teachers.

The curriculum is not established in advance, but develops as 'investigations' develop. These 'investigations' can last from a few days to several months. They may start from a chance event such as an observation of a spider spinning a web, an idea or problem posed by a child or group of children, or an experience initiated directly by the teachers. Teachers ensure that investigations include a broad range of concepts such as literacy, numeracy, science, art, drama, etc. Teachers facilitate learning by asking children questions that lead to deeper thinking and further action. Reggio educators highly value questioning, reflection, research and adaptation.

It was interesting to see the different planning formats and types of documentation undertaken by the various schools and pre-schools. One centre had certain themes that were to be covered within a two year period. There was no end point for 'investigations' and children were expected to drive the learning integration.

At all centres teaching teams met regularly, discussing their observations and children's learning and time was set aside for documentation. The power of a group of teachers was seen as very conducive to understanding children's learning progress as it provided the opportunity to listen to a range of perspectives on a child's learning. A range of successful strategies were observed. One was an observation sheet for all teachers involved with the children to comment on. At one school learning activities and learning outcomes were filled in throughout the 'investigation' process. Booklets as evidence of investigations provided clear documentation of children's learning. Another school's expectation was that there would be a summary at the end of each 'investigation' giving evidence of teacher voice, student voice, teacher and student reflection, with photos, videos, etc. One pre-school team gets together at the end of the day and reads the day's documentation back to the children who are then able to follow/revisit where their thinking has been for the day. The classroom is then set up for the following day based on this discussion.

## **Implications for Our Own Setting**

Having the Head Teacher of the adjoining pre-school, as well as the Dean of our Junior School involved in some of the visits provoked much discussion and reflection. Our goal is to try to look through the Reggio lens and incorporate the philosophy into our settings as best we can, to ensure successful transition to school.

A discussion with the Head Teacher of the adjoining pre-school several weeks following our visits highlighted some of the changes that had already been implemented within the centre. A general description of the pre-school is that it is community based, has a close association with the school, has a holistic view of the

child, relationships are seen as important, has some structure to the day – but freedom within, and children are aware of routines and expectations. Changes implemented within the Pre-School:

- Now allowing projects to run their course rather than having a set date to finish
- Making learning visible – now having work out for children to see/reflect upon
- Teacher acts as ‘child’s memory’
- Shared projects – reminding children of where they’ve been in their learning
- Children come together to discuss what’s been happening/reflect/plan the day
- Children put into groups depending on where they’ve been – mat/outside area/art area
- Child’s enduring interest followed – similar to ‘Dip Time’ at school
- Goal setting with child/whanau
- Sometimes it is the teacher who suggests the provocation to set the path
- Listening/ Observing/ Providing a provocation to get something going/ Reflecting/ Keep offering back
- Daily Diary up for display – showing what has been happening during the day
- Daily Diaries then taken to planning meetings for reflection and future planning – prompting coming back to things
- Goal – more documentation of learning journeys – more photos with statements/questions

A discussion with the Dean of our Junior School who is also one of our New Entrant teachers, showed the way in which she and her team are integrating the Reggio philosophy into their teaching. Her way of ‘looking through the Reggio lens’ is that investigations or provocations are viewed as a way of celebrating learning. They are all driven from children, all brought from home. The children are able to show their learning through different ways – writing, painting, building, constructing, etc. The approach has been called ‘Dip Time.’ The words for what the DIP meant were decided by the children.

D = decision making

I = independent, inventing and inquiry

P = play

The children’s initial thoughts about what ‘Dip Time’ would involve included choosing, being in the learning zone, science, art, numbers, writing, learning, reading, creating, problem solving and playing. During ‘Dip Time’ the children are called the Explorers and there are regular conversations including both children and teachers regarding what is/ is not working. The key competencies underpin the whole approach (Thinking, managing self, participating and contributing, using symbols and texts, relating to others.) There will be ongoing fine tuning of how the regulatory requirements will be met - i.e. National standards reporting, whilst following how the children want to learn

There is much discussion about making choices, taking risks, stretching the brain, and how it's ok to make mistakes. There is a focus on learner agency, lots of discussion and problem solving, with children learning to work with others, learning from each other and negotiating. The Key Competencies and Values are integrated into learning. Teachers are conscious of the importance of 'seizing the moment.' They are very conscious of the importance of listening and are endeavouring to take more time to listen and slow down.

The introduction of 'Dip Time' has been a highlight. 'Dip Time' is when children have the freedom to follow their individual investigations or provocations. The element of play has become an important component of 'Dip Time,' following much research and reading on the importance of play. A range of activities involving aspects of play are offered – blocks, dough, water, sand, construction, an investigation table, dress ups, painting, etc. Often, children will continue with the class investigation, continuing and expressing their learning through different ways. They enjoy the freedom to express themselves as they wish. More creativity is obvious and the children who are not ready for formal learning benefit. There has been considerable positive feedback from parents, especially of boys, who want to continue 'Dip Time' at home. Teachers are noticing children learning more from others and feel that children are showing more excitement about learning.

*'Creativity seems to emerge from multiple experiences, coupled with well-supported development of personal resources, including a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known.'* Loris Malaguzzi

As with pre-school, teachers are allowing investigations to run their course, rather than have a set date to finish. Work is out for children to see/reflect upon/come back to. There is lots of discussion about the learning that has been happening. Teachers are focusing on listening and observing and sharing their reflections with one another.

## **Conclusions**

Looking through the Reggio lens has opened up much discussion and reflection on ways in which transition to school can be made more successful. As stated earlier, a true Reggio Emilia school or pre-school can only happen in Reggio Emilia in Italy. All that we can do in New Zealand is look through the Reggio lens and incorporate the philosophy into our settings as best we can.

The readings and visits have acted as a catalyst for change and prompted a stronger liaison and closer relationship between the school and the adjoining pre-school, as well as greater sharing of information between the two. There will be a focus on greater continuity of learning for children during their transition from pre-school to school. A new role has been created for a teacher to run a 'Transition to School' programme with increased parental involvement encouraged.

The changes in teaching approaches already implemented, giving children more agency, giving them the freedom to pursue their own passions or investigations, giving them more time, and being prepared to step back, listen and observe are

making teaching and learning far more enjoyable. Balancing our own Inquiry model of teaching within the New Entrant setting, with the pressure of getting children to reach the National Standard within their first year of school seems more achievable. The high focus on literacy and numeracy will still be maintained, but within an environment where children are provided with more freedom about the ways in which they express their learning and more choice about activities, investigations and who they work with. Maybe 'Dip Time' is the start of our 'Reggio inspired approach to teaching and learning. Our goal will be to build on the positive start made within both the pre-school and New Entrant area, integrating aspects of the pedagogy of Reggio that fit within our own settings.

As one teacher at St Cuthbert's said, the Reggio approach is really just 'best practice pedagogy.'

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