

To Investigate 'Participating and Contributing' Key
Competency Development
with a Future Focus,
within the Reggio Emilia-Inspired Approach.



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Executive Summary

This paper shares experience gained in visiting schools and talking to experts about the Reggio Emilia approach, with a focus on student engagement and the key competency of participating and contributing. It also discusses pedagogical shifts in thinking and practice that are not quick fixes, but will need to be unravelled carefully if we are to engage all students, develop their love of learning, and enable them to face the real challenges of the twenty-first century.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is summarize the investigation made into how the Reggio Emilia inspired approach (further referred to as REIA within this report) in the junior school might

- i) enable or promote greater/increased student participation and contribution, and engagement, in learning;
- ii) provide a more meaningful and authentic learning approach which is aligned with the school vision of 'prepare our children to walk the world stage.'

There is a strong drive from educational policy leaders *"to document examples of future focused practice and identify the conditions supporting teaching and learning approaches that enable students to develop the skills, competencies, knowledge and understanding required to participate in, and contribute to, our national and global future."* Ministry of Education 2011, p.4 cited in Principles for a future-oriented education system, Rachel Bolstad, New Zealand review of Education 2011-2012, 21, 80. I believe my sabbatical will support this intention.

A term's sabbatical leave was used to gain knowledge of current good practice, research, investigation and development in thinking about the implementation of the REIA in the primary school setting. This is 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 various people, including findings and reflections from readings on how these ideas might better serve the needs of our children and the challenges associated with implementing them.

These ideas were explored in several ways:

Readings and Reflections

Visits to schools and early childhood centres

Professional discussions with educators and 'experts' of the REIA

Reggio's optimistic way of looking at children focuses on what they do know, rather than what they do not.

Background and Rationale

The key point that influenced the choice of investigation:

Over recent years we have observed that there are increasing numbers of 5 year olds entering school with less than 'expected' conventional readiness-for-school skills. This is compounded by significant roll growth and the transience of some of the dairy farming families, especially around the 1st June "gypsy day" period.

As a school we have responded to this in a variety of ways and recognise that these 21st century learners require us to think differently. We can't keep doing the same thing. I like Seth Godin's quote, author of Stop Stealing Dreams (what is school for?). He says "We don't do education to students, we do it with them." Our junior school teachers began exploring and experimenting with aspects of the REIA.

However, I consider that there is a greater challenge, one of daring to step back and rethink the real nature and purpose of education – what and how it should and could be different. This purpose is beyond the scope of this paper, but may contain traces of this inspiration stemmed from Ken Robinson's latest book on 'Creative Schools.'

To further assist this development I felt I would benefit from gaining a greater knowledge of this approach and to be able to utilise the experience, expert knowledge and research from sources such as REIA educators, NZCER personnel and readings.

Methodology

Where am I coming from?

I value being able to network with other educators to listen, discuss, support and help each other make meaning of situations for the greater good of improving outcomes for students. This sabbatical enabled me to connect with others and see different perspectives.

I see children who are engaged (or appear to be engaged) and those who struggle to be engaged, and to participate and contribute due to various reasons, known and unknown. Why is this? Did the REIA make a difference? Why? Why not? What else?

I have witnessed the frustration of good teachers as they have grappled with the pace of imposed changes, time taken to make sense of these, and what this means for children’s education, yet these teachers remained professional and committed to finding ways to better engage the students in their care. The search is relentless and efforts tireless, often to the detriment of self. Schools are also getting social issues like we’ve never seen before, both in frequency and complexity. What does this mean for the design of programmes and pedagogy?

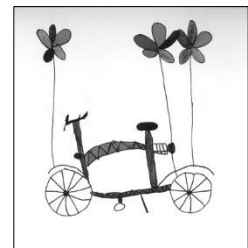
How schools cope and move forward positively requires a call for ongoing dialogue, research, action and reflection, forging deliberate pathways away from any Industrial style of education and advancing to 21st century future-focused thinking of education.

Questions on my mind:

What are we currently doing and why?

What are we hanging on to and why?

What does this look like...for the child?...for the teacher?



| What I did? | Why I did what I did? |
|--|---|
| a. saw the REIA programme in action b. visited a range of education centres c. listened to educators and questioned d. various readings e. reflection time | a. to observe the practical application b. to see similarities and differences c. to find out their philosophy, hear about their story (successes and pitfalls) d. to upskill, browse, understand, process, analyse, consider possibilities, challenge my thinking, my philosophy e. revisit my philosophy and... ‘so what?’ ‘is it worth it?’ ‘what next?’ |

What I did not do:

- spend more than a day with a school, so as not to impose or take up too much time; I was very appreciative of the time given to me by busy people
- distract or interrupt children from their important task at hand and their learning flow

Strengths

- a smorgasbord approach to seeing REIA across a range of settings was a good starting point to investigation
- increased my knowledge and understandings with Reggio-inspired people and schools
- had reflection time in between visits

Limitations

- time and travel costs, e.g. not able to see southern schools or revisit some contacts
- balancing time - a day or less in a school does not allow in-depth observation
- timetabling and coordinating school visits could be challenging; e.g. some I wanted to visit were not available at the time I was free; two schools I planned to visit and was looking forward to did not occur at late notice due to their staff sickness and a change in their circumstances beyond their control

Findings

- Inspired by the passion (and grit) of teachers and experts
- Intrigued by the variety of approaches
- Impressed by children highly engaged in their learning



More questions were raised than I found answers, however this is fine as I was not looking for a prescription, but to be stirred and challenged in my thinking about our journey thus far. No one ever stated that they had “got there,” even the ‘Reggio Emilians’ in Italy state this, as there’s always more to experience, learn and reflect on. In fact all were deeply respectful of the Reggio Emilia approach, using it as an inspiration for their practice, and being committed to a journey, a better way to cultivate within the child a lifelong passion for learning and exploration (Reggio goal).

As I engaged with educators, I was keen to explore the thinking and processes undertaken and how their journeys were playing out. The REIA is so much more than changing the room environment, using natural materials and having work stations, though this appears to be a common way people start off, and can be visually alluring. However, it is a mistake to remain at this stage, thinking you are ‘doing’ Reggio without understanding and acting on the Reggio values and principles in your pedagogy and practice.

Our values and beliefs really do become our practice; our subconscious thought reveals itself in what we say or what we do. Sometimes it can surprise us!

When asked to DEFINE the REGGIO EMILIA approach, one expert said that it fits in perfectly with the New Zealand Curriculum and Te Whariki (the woven mat page 13 and the community coming together):

- There are VALUES and PRINCIPLES that underpin practice
- It’s about MAKING LEARNING VISIBLE, by LISTENING with eyes and ears
- It’s about providing INTELLECTUALLY RIGOROUS OPPORTUNITIES for children to ENGAGE in small GROUP INVESTIGATIONS / OPPORTUNITIES
- It’s about the teacher being a LEARNER too = a COMMUNITY of LEARNERS (no ONE teacher should ever work alone as you need to have other perspectives; community collaboration is important).

Another school defines the Reggio approach as being based on a comprehensive philosophy, underpinned by several fundamental guiding principles:

- The child as protagonist, collaborator and communicator – *Whakamana*
- The teacher as partner, nurturer, guide and researcher
- Cooperation as the foundation of the education system – *Nga Hononga*
- The environment as the 'third teacher' – *Mana Whenua*
- Documentation as communication to be shared with family – *Whanau Tangata*
- Democracy is something that cannot be taught; it needs to be lived (Carla Rinaldi from In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia 2006)

At the heart of the Reggio approach is the belief that children are full of curiosity and creativity. The Reggio goal is to cultivate within the child a lifelong passion for learning and exploration. Te Whariki and the Reggio approach are strongly linked by similar concepts. Both approaches start with the belief that all children are competent and capable learners. Also critical to both approaches is the belief that all children are capable of extending themselves, expressing themselves and learning in many different ways (this is referred to as the '100 languages' that children possess).

The 12 principles of the Reggio approach are:

1. Children are active protagonists of their growth and development processes.
2. The hundred languages
3. Participation
4. Listening
5. Learning as a process of individual and group construction
6. Educational research
7. Educational documentation
8. Progettazione (...process of planning and designing...the strategy of thought and action...)
9. Organisation
10. Environment, spaces, and relations
11. Professional development
12. Assessment



Carla Rinaldi is a senior pedagogical advisor to “Reggio Children” in Italy, says

"We like to say that the child is competent but it is not enough just to declare this. If we really want the child to be competent, we have to change time, space, roles and rules to permit this competent child to exist."

Carla goes on to say that “it is crucial to appreciate the connections to a particular view of the rights, potentials, traditions, and role that a society creates for its children.”

Who is the child?

What is childhood?

Does childhood simply exist, or is it created by us?

Does each society create its image of childhood and of its child?

How does a child learn?

What is the meaning of 'to educate'?

What is the relationship of education centres, family, and society?

Are education centres in general a preparation for life, or are they part of life?

Or how much are we stuck in the past?

"a perpetual, self-renewing underclass, helpless to escape from the decisions of adults until they become adults themselves" (Ender's Game, Card, 1885)

or

ranks of uniformed children subjected to classroom approaches that one character describes as "an ordeal she had to sit through in order to experience the fun parts of the curriculum" (The Diamond Age, Stephenson, 1995)

These and other questions will evoke and provoke discussions relevant to each person's particular time and place, and encourage a sense of search for a meaningful, just and civil co-existence with a joy in life for every child and adult. This is the journey.

"Key Competencies for the future" (Hipkins, Bolstad, Boyd & McDowall, 2014) is a compelling read that I find has some parallels with Reggio thinking. Origins of the key competencies began with The "Delors Report" (UNESCO, 1996) identifying four simple but powerful "pillars" of any education system. They said that every child was entitled to an education that would support them in:

Learning to be (still needs work)

Learning to know (familiar)

Learning to do (familiar)

Learning to live together (still needs work)

The OECD further developed these into the idea of key competencies around 2005. One of their overarching aims is to persuade governments to invest appropriately in the learning of all their young people. The DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) project report arrived at these four competencies:

| Name given competency by OECD | | NZC version |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Thinking (cross-cutting) | Acting autonomously | Managing self |
| | Functioning in socially heterogeneous groups | Relating to others |
| | | Participating and contributing |
| | Using tools interactively | Using language, symbols and texts |
| | | Thinking (not identified as cross-cutting) |

Interestingly, it was after World War II in the small Italian town of Reggio Emilia, that a group of parents and teachers created a system of progressive early childhood education that they felt would strengthen the community and provide the best chance for future democracy. The approach drew inspiration from the fall of fascism and the hope that dictatorship would never happen again in Italy. This movement was led by Loris Malaguzzi and has been inspiring educational thinking worldwide ever since this time.

A few observations /findings / comments from school visits

-A high level of student engagement across all ages. Children were obviously happy and motivated in their learning when they were able to make choices, following and enabling personal interests/inquiries/investigations. I saw a wonderful example of an 'experienced' 5 year old girl who was focused on her project - it was meaningful and personalised. She initiated and received support from the teacher or another adult in the room at critical times in the process. When having an opportunity to share her progress with the class, this young girl's sense of identity/mana, value, wellbeing and confidence as a learner were clearly evident. I was deeply moved by her learning persona.

You've got to listen to what's important to the child.

-REIA provides opportunities and conditions for self-management and taking responsibility from an early age so that by Year 6 there is an element of huge trust.

-Greatly increased student learning outcomes since using the REIA (value added).

-Integration occurs across the day in reading, writing and maths.

-Teacher knowledge of the child and their interests is key.

-Have fun learning is key to engagement.

-Many opportunities for problem solving and thinking skills

-Teachers offer 'workshops' for children to select

-Science and technology aspects features highly with investigations



"We travel by the compass, not the road (predetermined)."

-New Entrants are not put under academic pressure; instead the focus is on key competencies, e.g. have opportunities to understand the language used at school, to observe, play, experiment and see how school works, to develop friendships; helping each other and sharing comes out more naturally; the teacher gets to know the child and vice versa.

-A varied / personalised interpretation by schools of Learning Stations vs Projects

-Children who have done rich projects still talk about them years later – positive impact.

-Have an emergent curriculum; 98% of projects come from the children.

-Use the language of Reggio – with good listening – children’s enthusiasm drives it

ERO comment to a school: “we don’t have these kinds of conversations with children in other schools.”

-Reggio terminology: be aware how you interpret the language, such as the term ‘project.’ A project can imply there’s a beginning, middle and end, whereas the Italian Reggio word is ‘investigazione’ (investigation), which is more open-ended because the process undertaken is more important than an end product.

-Learning stations

a) sometimes the teachers are surprised by what children become highly engaged in or not, e.g. some picture books about Maui on one table sustained the attention of boys in particular. The class had heard one of the stories recently, and I witnessed one boy in deep concentration, examining the pages slowly, while others clustered together and were engaged in rich conversation, making meaning of the text and being fascinated by the striking colours and patterns. I couldn’t help but think of possibilities, but the animated oral language exchange was priceless. Imagine if they had to answer pre-set teacher questions instead of the stimulating dialogue that they had.

b) Another station where there was a written word find type of task showed mixed engagement; I wondered if children were doing this in compliance, or did they really enjoy it, while some appeared reluctant to do this task.

c) varied cues for children to do their tasks, such as individual clipboards or seen on the whiteboard

-Greater collaboration / cooperation / allows for tuakana teina (peer models) to naturally emerge. I saw a lovely example of three 5 year old boys who were mid construction with cartons. They helped each other intrinsically, taking turns to hold pieces together and using a hot glue gun. One child wasn’t confident in using the glue gun, but the others assisted and enabled him to work it. They experimented with placement of their cartons and problem solving independently, having constant dialogue and creating the story.

-Children’s ideas are valued and respected, e.g. finding things of interest and running with the idea. Not all may be interested at first, but further discussion and investigation often highlights an area of interest, so others often want to join in too. Collaborating teachers with knowledge of the children plan carefully and consider perspectives for provocations.

-Children enthuse each other; it snowballs; a good teacher keeps dropping pebbles into the pool creating the ripple effect.

Whatever is important to the student is the most important thing.

An inspiring visit in a senior class of Year 5/6 children:

-These children were not just engaged in their learning; the teacher said that engagement was 'MEGA.' The teacher had enhanced relationships as he was able to spend more time with them; there was great trust and they cared about learning. They were engaged and wanted to do it, so much so that these children continue working in the weekend. The children designed their learning each week, with teacher feedback (a robust process to arrive at this point). During my time in this classroom area, I did not see any off task child, only all fully engaged, participating and contributing in quality learning. I was as impressed by their learning persona, as the 5 year old girl I mentioned above.

-Children decide where things go in the room, and what goes up on wall, e.g. at the start of the year; they have ownership, and are valued; it's their space. Work is displayed as is relevant to them. E.g. no alphabet chart, but they may have, or have access to a version.



-Documentation comment: recording children's comments powerful; archiving and valuing thinking; referred back to and can be shared with families. This is one of the Reggio principles – it gives value to and makes explicit, visible and accessible the nature of the individual and group learning processes of both the children and the adults.

-Learning is visible – walls, documentation, scrapbooks (individual, group, class), computers, family blogs, portfolios...capturing the learning in progress / the process.

-Creative use of spaces, e.g. corridors in between served to link rooms, and were transformed into work spaces for children; outside spaces well used.

-One school says no teacher desk (or belongings) takes up space – you need to be able to move out of the room in 30 minutes.

-Creative use of staffing – where two teachers are working in same space, they alternated week about with doing group teaching in a quieter part of the room, while the other was free to rove and engage in purposeful conversations with children. Teacher aides, parent help also used.

-Community of learners, i.e. teacher collaboration high ("no one teacher should work alone as many perspectives = richer); all teachers are on a different journey and levels of engagement is very different.

-Professional development, e.g. syndicate/PLG focused on Reggio with practical readings, discussion and problem solving, reflection, pedagogy shifts.

-There's a criss-cross, intersecting relationships of children, teachers, parents, community members. A continual exploration of how to enhance relationships.

Implications

Our values and beliefs really do become our practice; our subconscious thought reveals itself in what we say or what we do. Sometimes it can surprise us!

Now more than ever it is time for teachers to peel back their layers of values and examine their beliefs if they expect to increase student engagement / participating and contributing. They must be prepared to meet some sticky layers along the way and reflect on why and what does this mean for me? This not a quick fix and is not all packaged up with a pretty bow, ready to follow the instructions, but will take time – in the mud, the fog; it's a life-long journey. Isn't that exciting?

The implications for school leaders is to be prepared and draw upon practical research. Here are two NZ examples:

-updated BES Iteration by Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2015): Transformational vs Pedagogical Leadership; the role of leadership in developing effective teaching; what makes a bigger difference in school-family/whanau connections; how does collective responsibility work?

-Key Competencies for the Future by Hipkins, Bolstad, Boyd and McDowall (2014): I have already referred to it as a compelling read; my copy is well used, with sticky notes, highlighting and annotations. Comments from the back cover:

'They lay out rich new possibilities for educators to explore in their own work.'

'use them as a stepping-off point for conversations about how students learn and the future of schooling.'

'It's also for anyone interested in wrestling with why education needs transformative change.'

The implications for teachers are to be open, honest, reflective and value collaboration.

How do we foster in children a powerful learning persona?

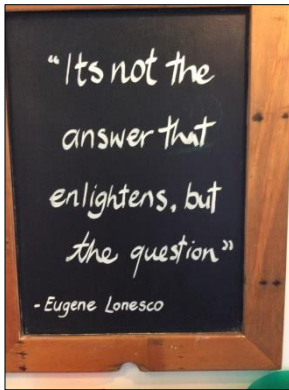
What is authentic learning and what does it look like?

So if authentic learning = high engagement, why, and how does it happen?

What pedagogical approaches do you use? What might you do differently in your moment by moment, day-to-day, or over the week, term, year, to build a better future?

A real key I saw affecting authentic, high engagement in learning was when there was a switch in power from a 'top-down' traditional model to a 'bottom-up' grassroots approach, where the children had ownership, responsibility, fun and their ideas were valued.

How do you achieve this switch? This is also key and when the core principles and values of the Reggio approach come into play alongside exploring the concepts within the Key Competencies for the Future book.



Educators I spoke to shared stories: All of us cope with change in different ways and a different pace, so it is important to allow 'the gift of time' to teachers. Some people jump in too quickly, only to fail as they have not allowed time to fully understand before they say, "oh well I tried that, but it didn't work." While some keep going thinking they are really "doing it," and others who become frustrated or disillusioned. Yes sometimes this may happen, but it is important not to stay stuck, but to press on with the journey.

Collaboration is an integral part of the Reggio pedagogy of relationships and the pedagogy of listening. Collaboration enables us to rejoice in subjectivity, it provides the opportunity to bring different realities together, enabling us to share wisdoms and create richer possibilities. Rinaldi (2000) suggests that it is the diversity in viewpoints that provides the possibility for acquiring knowledge and is maximised as the teacher becomes a researcher amongst researchers. This is not easy. It means genuinely listening to others with respect, and being open to their ideas, when we usually prefer our own. Pedagogical documentation provides a wonderful basis for collaboration.

Another key was that children need to have many opportunities to work together and all that entails. Children need to be able to talk each other's talk (and not talk past one another) to become capable in conversation with diverse others. They need to know how to listen and engage with others, and to express alternative viewpoints respectfully. Is this not real life now, not just something to prepare children for in the future?

Our teachers have an early understanding of the REIA, except for the D.P. who has done extensive readings. I suggest next steps could be to:

1. Spend time identifying and examining existing beliefs and values as an evidence gathering exercise. Include children's views as well. Individual and collective documentation would be useful (What? Why? How?).
2. Re-define the culture and parameters of what working collaboratively looks like.
3. Overview of the 12 principles of the Reggio approach (over time look in-depth at these).
4. Focus on the Pedagogy of Listening, really listening. In participated education, an active attitude of listening between adults, children, and the environment is the premise and context of every educational relationship...
5. Use collaborative decision making about when and which principles to do next.
6. Leaders refer to the BES work and read the book, Key Competencies for the Future. To integrate and explore with Reggio concepts would be desirable.

7. Further P.D: Visit Reggio-inspired schools where possible or consider an online exchange; reps attend Reggio meetings in Christchurch; focused PLG's in school.

There are of course many other readings available and I have not listed all the ones I have read in this paper. As well there are blogs, articles and various books about the Reggio approach that I have explored.

A late addition to my readings, which I have just begun, is 'Creative Schools – The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education' by Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica (2015). He expands upon his famous TED talk "How Schools Kill Creativity" and presents groundbreaking, practical solutions to a critical issue for our nation: how to transform our troubled education system. This book was recommended to me by a principal I visited who was excited by the book (parallels with Reggio), which was the current focus of his PLG.

'If we limit children, we limit ourselves.' Loris Malaguzzi

Benefits

- To lift student achievement with increased engagement / participation and contributing.
- To keep alive children's voracious appetite for learning.
- To create learning opportunities that are authentic, meaningful, purposeful, personalised.
- To see a growing number of children who are engaged in thoughtful and empowering collective actions that aim to make their immediate world a better place.
- To see their eyes light up as they describe their experiences of doing something that is real.
- To give students a strong sense of belonging to their school and wider communities.
- To give opportunities to participate / be active, caring citizens who create positive change.
- To work together in ways that challenge viewpoints while also building a sense of citizenship and community wellbeing.
- To realise that life is not without challenges; it's not always easy and grit is required.
- To see learning that engages and empowers everyone involved
- To increase personal and emotional capabilities when participating and contributing with others - the capacity to listen to, and take on board, different viewpoints, and to disagree or suggest alternative approaches in constructive ways.
- What about the potential within a child?

'I hope you will become part of the movement to a more holistic approach that nurtures the diverse talents of all our children.' Ken Robinson (2015)

Conclusions

We all need to work together to prepare our young people to be active futures-makers, not just passive recipients of what fate might bring. As a school, we may wish to revisit and review our mission statement, "Prepare our children to walk the world stage," because as our young people work to make a difference to their world, these students are active citizens now – they do not need to wait for the future.

'Utopian ideals, dreams and desires must be part of everyday life in the school, creating a rich normality.' Jan Millikan

I found the ten weeks away from my school, gave me a very valuable chance to pause and reflect on what makes a difference to student engagement, and participation and contributing with a future focus. The chance to engage in in-depth discussions with colleagues, in a wide variety of settings, enabled me to see the Reggio Emilia inspired approach in action and to compare and contrast our journey to where we might go next.

The heart of the Reggio enterprise lies in daily practice. It has a "feel" to it.

I would like to express my humble gratitude to the Board who continued to support my sabbatical even though I start a new position after this sabbatical term. My passion of pursuing the Reggio approach will not be lost, as you know that Aroha Stewart D.P. shares this passion and the teachers support this approach too.

Any contacts, resources, information I have gained will be shared with Aroha and will not be lost. I am convinced that you will see a difference in both teacher and student learning as the Reggio journey continues at Winchester Rural School.

Reggio children at work (Google images)



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Appendix

1. Te Whariki – the woven mat

Te Whāriki – *the woven mat*

