

Title

What can I learn from the Reggio Emilia approach that will transfer to a Decile 1 school in South Auckland, to support early language development?

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Te Matauranga

Introduction

It was a privilege to become immersed in the culture of Reggio Emilia. The city itself is a city of several parts. My accommodation was in the part of the city with cobbled streets, historic churches, beautiful squares, street markets and a vibrant, noisy atmosphere, including lots of bars and coffee shops. Here people live in very old and stunningly beautiful apartment buildings that tower over the narrow streets and that are reminiscent of many cities throughout Europe.

My daily walk to the heart of the Reggio Emilia children's centre – the Loris Malaguzzi complex, took me across the train track - actually under – not across. This is the track that connects Italy, and also much of Europe. The trains are amazing, fast, frequent and sometimes scary - especially if you get left on a station late at night and the train doesn't come.

The walk under the train station is an interesting introduction to the other side of life in Reggio Emilia – that of the refugees. Like other cities in Europe, Reggio Emilia has been

flooded with refugees, many of them young men. The graffiti and rubbish in the subway is an indication of the poverty and conditions in which these refugees are living. The 'container cities' close to the railway track and just outside the main part of the city are replicated throughout Europe, as are the beggars, the hustlers and the thieves.

In contrast to the lifestyle of the refugees looms the extremely large and stunning Loris Malaguzzi International Centre. It literally shines in the sunlight and stands imposingly in the flat Italian surroundings. The centre was built in 2006 and named for Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), a pedagogist who worked with the local administration to open the first municipality run preschools and later the infant-toddler centres. His legacy after many years of working closely with colleagues was an innovative technology with children at the heart of their learning.

The centre named for him houses large scale conference, exhibition, research and cafeteria facilities, as well as being a resource hub and hosting a number of atelier areas for practical discovery and learning. The size of the centre is stunning, enabling several events to be held concurrently. The group of which I was a part was made up of 450 participants from countries all over the world.

Reggio Emilia philosophy

'Reggio Children' was founded in 1994 with the 'Reggio Children International Network' in 2006. Initially the purpose was to support the post war recovery of the region by focussing on the principles of respect, responsibility and

community and by bringing back joy into children's lives – children who had been severely affected by the war that had ravaged the area. This innovative philosophy involved the creation of enriching and supportive learning environments based on the interests of children. The early principles of parental involvement and a strong link with nature and the environment have been enduring aspects of the movement.

Reggio Emilia itself has now become a place synonymous with this philosophy, and the city very much markets itself on the Reggio children theme. For example, when shopping in the market and talking to the locals, the most common question following 'where are you from?' is 'are you here for Reggio children?' The community are obviously very proud of their early childhood centres and the philosophy surrounding them.

It is therefore not a surprise to learn that the funding for the centres comes in the most part from the municipality – thus enabling the incredibly high percentage of children from the area to attend. This large input of money is something for us in New Zealand to envy. That and the very strong collective commitment to the philosophy – a commitment that has been powerful and enduring over many years.

The principle of 'community' is a strongly held and discussed Reggio belief, that in many ways guides the way the centres operate. The belief is that everyone is connected, and from birth you become part of a community to which you contribute, and which also is responsible for your pastoral care and the development of your potential.

There is also a very strong focus on relationships. The Reggio understanding is that from birth everyone is in a relationship - which brings you together with others and makes every person 'bigger than themselves'. This view encompasses what the spirit of Reggio is all about, and guides the practices of welcoming each child and their story, welcoming each family, and welcoming the history that has brought everyone together. Of particular interest to me was the term 'children with special rights' which contrasts to the New Zealand term 'children with special needs'.

For me personally, I believe this was a great time to visit Reggio Emilia. Having recently been released from the constraints of National Standards, we are now able to look fully and unreservedly at the needs and interests of every child. The 'project' type discovery favoured by the Reggio movement makes enormous sense in terms of 'turning children on' to learning and allowing them to proceed in a direction of their choice.

My original purpose in studying the Reggio Emilia concept was to support the early language acquisition in new entrant children. In fact, I gained so much more.

Application

We increasingly enrol five year olds who communicate in ways other than oral language. This is requiring new teaching strategies and experiences to support their learning. In the National Standards era, we were expected to have these children reading at Level 12 after their first year at school.

This was neither possible nor kind. Without these unrealistic expectations, we can now focus on each child and plan a learning journey for them that is specifically planned to meet their needs.

This is what the Reggio Emilia philosophy advocates:

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

Furthermore, the approach puts the natural development of children and the close relationship they have with their environment at the centre of their philosophy.

The approach strongly advocates the following:

- Parents are the 'first' teachers,
- Teachers are the 'second' teachers, and
- The environment is the 'third' teacher.

Parents are considered a central component in the Reggio process, and are viewed as 'partners, collaborators and advocates' for their children. They are involved in every aspect of the child's learning, are frequently on site, and are reported to in an ongoing manner in a number of different and authentic ways.

The teacher's role is as a facilitator who plans lessons and activities based on the interests of the children, and who questions, adapts and supports each child's discoveries. Teachers also observe, collect data and document outcomes using a variety of non-standard assessment techniques.

Working alongside each teacher is an atelier, who supports each child's learning, facilitates this learning by introducing resources, and generally aids in the processes of learning. These processes include supporting the 'hundred languages of children' which depict the multitude of ways children express their thoughts and creativity. This includes drawing, dramatic play, sculpture, writing, making models, dance, movement, play, painting music and many more. The strongly held Reggio belief is that these languages are part of each child, and that learning and play are both parts of the way children see and explore the world.

Conclusion

The opportunity to visit Reggio Emilia and become immersed in the history and culture of such a beautiful place is one for which I am extremely appreciative and that I will never forget. I learned so much more than my original stated purpose. The philosophy of Reggio children is so tied to the history and the area that it would be impossible to replicate anywhere else. This is a clearly stated fact by the Reggio proponents – that it is a philosophy from which parts can be taken and used according to the needs and settings of those who visit. This was an enormous relief for me, and allowed

me to look at what we already do well, and what we could introduce to do better.

I have come away from Reggio with a strong intention to use the outdoor environment more as a learning area. This includes understanding nature, and appreciating and caring for our own environment, and the contribution we all need to make in the care and future of the global environment.

I have a renewed passion for all things creative. The 'Hundred Languages of Children' brings home to me the vital importance of each child exploring, recreating and solving problems in their own way. It moves the role of teachers to be one of co-learners, and providers of a range of resources and learning options to enable children's choice.

I loved the involvement of families and the inclusion of family members in every part of the learning journeys of their children. The use of so many assessment avenues really makes me question the way we currently report to parents. There is so much scope that acknowledges and celebrates the way learning happens.

And finally, the placement of each child firmly at the centre of their learning is music to my ears.

My learning at Reggio Emilia has motivated me and made me ask many questions of myself about where to next for our school. I possibly have more questions than answers at this stage, however I am returning to my school feeling energised and very strong in my philosophy about the changes that

need to happen. My aim is to keep this focus in a special place in my head and heart, and ensure that I make it a priority to begin implementing and sharing upon my return.