

Seeing the Wider Picture Reflections on the Reggio Emilia Approach

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I had the opportunity to visit Reggio Emilia the first week of April this year. As an early years academic, I was familiar with the Reggio Emilia approach through my readings (Edwards *et al.* 1998; Katz and Cesarone 1994) and the inspirational keynote speech of Rinaldi (2005) and, therefore, positively biased to experience this internationally celebrated system for preschool provision. At the same time, believing that excellence is something to strive for rather than to have achieved, I was open and keen to see and hear the little utterances and nuances that might shed some light on what makes this system world renowned. Therefore, I was prepared to hear the explicitly articulated and formulated ideas about the Reggio practice and its underlying principles, but, most importantly, I was acutely aware that I needed to unpack the underlying and the not-so-explicitly worded assumptions and values that underpin the culture and pedagogy of Reggio Emilia.

As anticipated, the RE visit proved to be an interesting, stimulating and thought-provoking experience. There was the initial excitement raised by the new, different and unfamiliar territory, but, as the week progressed, every talk and preschool visit constantly challenged initial ideas and assumptions. The keynote speakers provided historical and contextual information about the genesis, development, organisation and management of the RE preschool services from Second World War to date. They talked about the underpinning philosophy of their pedagogy (although theory was never mentioned) and they referred to issues which they need to deal with as the composition of the Reggio Emilia society is rapidly changing; during the last decade, the predominantly monocultural and homogenous society of RE has rapidly changed into a multicultural and heterogeneous society that brings with it new challenges and opportunities.

Background to Reggio Emilia practices

Reggio Emilia preschool services were born out of a spirit sparked by the disasters of the past (the Second World War), which broke up communities and relationships, but set aspirations for the future to avoid such disasters occurring again. Education was seen as a means of combating the disastrous ideology of fascism through collective effort, endeavours, achievements and the cultivation of communication and relationships. The current structure of management and administration of preschool services reflects the values of such collective endeavours and participation. The collaboration of public (local authority) and private sectors (e.g. in the form of

co-operatives and parental fee contribution) has necessitated externally imposed structures for, and of, accountability redundant. The collaborating bodies have passed the overarching responsibility for the preschool services on the 'Instituzione' for Early Childhood, which, supported financially by both sectors, acts independently and it is accountable to both of them.

During the visit, there was much talk about 'what and how' things are done in the Reggio Emilia preschools. Some information were given about the 'why', in the form of articulating the learning theory of constructivism that is said to underpin the 'what and how'. Such talks might have conditioned the visitors to focus on these aspects. The novelty of the experience itself might have also reinforced such a selective focus. So what does it make the Reggio Emilia approach successful for preschool provision? This question might only be answered if the pedagogy of observed practice is articulated and contextual factors are considered.

Pedagogy observed

The underpinning philosophy of Reggio Emilia about learning is nothing new or different from the philosophy that has influenced and still influences early years practices in many countries. What is new, or rather different, is how this philosophy has been interpreted and articulated into a coherent pedagogical praxis. Behind the exploratory and investigative nature of learning in the Reggio Emilia preschools, there is a strong didactic approach underpinned by a relational pedagogy.

There is often a strong and even negative connotation between didactics and instruction; didactics are even equated with instruction. The RE approach demonstrated that this need not to be the case. This is because the didactics of potential projects are first worked out by preschool staff through careful planning and reflection on the documentation of previous projects undertaken by and with the children. Before children are given the opportunity to explore potential projects themselves, adults have already gone through this process themselves. Pedagogistas, atelieristas¹ and other preschool staff carefully plan and explore, in advance, the possible directions that proposed projects may take and the resources required. This process allows adults to work out the complexity of proposed projects and the systematic and gradual facilitation and scaffolding required in order to assist children to arrive at meaningful propositions and

¹ The 'pedagogistas' and 'atelieristas' are the key professionals that shape and communicate the didactics of particular projects. Pedagogistas are key professionals that have a clear understanding of the adopted pedagogy. Each pedagogista works along side all other pedagogistas in the Reggio Emilia preschool services and, at the same time, s/he works along side a number of preschools (up to three) in a kind of advisory and coordinating capacity. In this way, pedagogistas offer continuity in, and parity of, the work carried out across all Reggio Emilia preschools. The pedagogistas also work very closely with atelieristas whose background knowledge and qualifications are in art. Atelieristas are based in individual preschools and work closely the preschool teacher and other staff to find ways by which art is utilised to explore and facilitate children's potential and capacity for learning.

suggestions for themselves. It allows them to identify the best ways of facilitating children's exploration and investigation and it removes the potential danger and pitfalls of direct instruction.

In the process of planning, the question left open for the preschool staff is the choice of the particular directions that they may follow among those proposed by the children; as the project develops and many proposals are made by the children, the preschool staff have to make a judgement which they will follow through. This is where children's engagement and motivation become the key criteria. By going through the process of careful planning, the adults know well what they expect the children to achieve; the children have to find this out for themselves through the facilitation of the adults.

This I witnessed in one preschool where the atelierista worked with two children, who had lumps of clay in front of them. Through the guidance of the atelierista, in the form of suggestions, modelling, perfecting of skill required, the lumps of clay were gradually transformed and refined to take a new form and life. Both the atelierista and the two children were deeply involved, absorbed and working intensely on their sculptures; they seemed to be completely cut-off from the happenings around them. The children were not left to their own devices, but were facilitated to use different tools, to handle the clay in different ways, incorporate other materials, make judgements about the ones that blend and fit well with clay and refine skills required to use the materials in hand. Most importantly, the two children were not given the same guidance and instructions; instead the guidance was informed by what each child was trying to do and the way s/he had handle the clay. The children themselves, through constructive facilitation, gradually came to form ideas on how to work with and manipulate clay and to produce refined and meaningful representations. In this instance, didactics took the form of indirect and, if necessary, direct facilitation of children to explore possible alternative avenues and pathways that their work may take and offered specific skills to apply or test such alternatives.

Reggio Emilia and its underpinning relational pedagogy

In the Reggio Emilia approach emphasis is also placed on children's self-awareness and well-being acquired through, and because of, the relationships which they develop with others.

Emphasis is placed on self-awareness because of others, not awareness of others. This is best exemplified in an observation of a preschool teacher working with a group of four children (two girls and two boys) at a round table. On the table there was a small basket with little wallets (approx. 9 x 5 cm), made from card; glue; colouring pencils; coloured buttons of different sizes and texture; glittering glue; scissors; and small folded papers. One of the girls was cutting the folded paper in half and placing them into the basket with the wallets. One boy and girl were decorating the little wallets with the colouring pens and/or by sticking on little colourful buttons.

When they finished each wallet, they placed it back into the basket and took another one to decorate. The fourth child (a boy) was decorating one of the little papers which the first girl had already cut into halves. The preschool teacher was sitting next to them. The boy addressed the teacher, she replied with a question: the boy replied. The teacher took a piece of paper and wrote a three word sentence. The boy copied it on to the small piece of paper which he had decorated. Then he took one of the wallets from the basket and inserted the piece of paper into it. The preschool teacher kept the wallet in front of her. The boy moved on to another table and joined four other children. Another girl came and joined the nursery teacher and the other children. The girl took a small piece of paper from the basket and started to decorate it. The teacher addressed the girl: she replied. The teacher took a piece of paper and wrote down a four word sentence. The girl copied the sentence, then she took the wallet which the other child had just left. The teacher requested the wallet back saying something (I understood that she was explaining that this wallet belonged to or was made by another boy). The girl seemed disappointed. The teacher took the basket with the wallets and placed it in front of the girl to choose one. The girl did so and she put her little paper into the wallet. The teacher kept this wallet in front of her.

It struck me that two things were happening. First, the decoration of the wallets was not an individual task: instead two of the children sitting at the table decorated the wallets in little steps. They would first do a basic decoration and then come to add and refine the decoration of each wallet. The same happened with the preparation of message slips. One girl cut the slips into halves and made them available to all children. This was a true collective activity. However, the messages were individual and individually written by each child (with adult support).

I asked the preschool teacher about this activity. She explained that the next day was Ciara's (one of the girl's) birthday. Every child had to send Ciara a very special message. So, she asked each child individually what they wanted this special message to be. Then she wrote it down and the child copied it on to the message slip which s/he had decorated. The teacher also explained that not all children are equally skilful in decorating the wallets. So to avoid disappointment, if each child had decorated his/her own wallet and compared it with the decorated wallets of other children, the decoration of all wallets was left to children who were confident and willing to do the decoration. The teacher pointed out her emphasis on the importance of the special message that the children would send to Ciara rather than its packaging.

This observation exemplifies the underpinning relational pedagogy of practice in the Reggio Emilia approach. The individual is valued and supported through collective endeavours and effort. The subtle messages that Ciara, and in effect all children, receive is that what matters is:

- i. how others relate to her, and how they feel and think about her; it is not what she receives.
- ii. individual's contribution to collective tasks and efforts, not the kind of contribution.

In this way a child's self-awareness, self-worth and self-esteem derive from how others relate with him/her and the acknowledgement of their contribution to group efforts and work.

Pedagogy explored

The Reggio Emilia approach is underpinned by a pedagogy that values the everyday experience of the child, teacher, parent and the community; is rooted in, and maintains historical memory; emphasises identity and place; is informed by theories, research and the practitioners' and children's own evidence rather than curricula frameworks. This is pedagogy of joy and for joy; of hope and aspiration. This is a pedagogy that emphasises self-awareness in relation to others, not awareness of others; of resolving conflict, not avoiding conflict. This is a relational pedagogy not a measurable outcomes-driven pedagogy.

There has been a freedom for practitioners in Italy to develop practice by, and from, the grassroots. Systematic documentation to capture the voices of children and reflection for action allows early childhood professionals to articulate and theorise the advisability and suitability of their practice. Such practice equips them with confidence to articulate their principles with an authoritative voice.

Reggio Emilia examined

That said, one could argue that by no means has Reggio Emilia found the magic formula. Indeed, there is little clarity about how children with additional support/special needs – or children with special rights, as Reggio Emilia prefers to call them – are served. Disadvantage was not mentioned as an issue of concern; neither was early intervention for identifying and meeting children's needs for holistic development. It was only cultural diversity that was identified as a recent issue of concern, due to rapid immigration. The lack of clarity on these issues raises some questions. Is this because these issues have been successfully dealt with or because of different attitudes towards them? Is there an implicit understanding that individuals are expected to contribute to the community according to their potential rather than to reach their assumed potential and be equally productive? Is the wide range of abilities, skills and competences seen as strength rather than limitation and/or disadvantage?

These questions may sound rhetorical in nature, but, in essence, they demonstrate the different values that underpin different societies. For those who would like to transplant or adapt the Reggio Emilia approach to English early childhood settings, without first acknowledging its

contextual factors, they should perhaps hold back and think twice. We can take aspects from the Reggio Emilia practice and incorporate them into existing practice, but we cannot 'do' Reggio Emilia – as it was often heard as a question posed by visitors during the visit – for in different countries we operate in both a completely different society and educational system. A society that is more diverse than homogeneous, values individuality and expects individuals to reach their potential and be equally productive citizens. An educational system that is blighted by multiple and complex hierarchies, accountability and inspection structures, a top-down imposed policy and with different kinds of provision, is as diverse as the qualifications available to early childhood professionals.

By these comments, I am not dismissing the value of the Reggio Emilia approach. Instead, it seems that RE works because of what Reggio Emilia society is. In England, we live in a different value-laden society. So, before in England or elsewhere we 'do' Reggio Emilia, we may first need to start talking about what we share with, and what differentiates us from RE, for example a different theoretical basis. As importantly, we may need to look at our practice to identify and articulate our identity as early childhood professionals, not to live on borrowed identities. We should not allow Reggio Emilia to become another imposed framework the underpinnings of which are vaguely or loosely understood.

What are your views on the issues raised by Theodora's paper? The questions below may set you thinking (and writing!)

- 1. What is the cultural and theoretical base for early years practices in the UK?**
- 2. What is it about Reggio Emilia practices that seem so worth emulating?**
- 3. Does Reggio Emilia actually represent a 'constructivist' approach? Or is it actually 'product' oriented?**

References

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