

Reggio Emilia at The Oxford School:

what is it, why are we doing it,
and what will it look like?

Q: WHAT IS IT?

A: An approach to educating our youngest students based on the case study originating out of the Italian city Reggio Emilia, which suffered the ravages of the Second World War from both the Allied and Axis side; out of the ashes a grass roots movement developed that sought to create a new community based on values of toleration, education, and social justice. All of this began at the earliest levels of education, beginning with toddlers in pre-school.

It has since grown to a movement in more than 150 countries, and incorporates a child-centred approach.

Q: WHY ARE WE DOING IT?

A: The Reggio approach is closely aligned with our school's core values of kindness, courtesy, and knowing our students well: As you will read in the eleven principles, we are largely doing these already, and would sharpen our practice from drawing on expertise from other Reggio schools.

Q: WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE IN OUR SCHOOL?

A: In year one, our Pre-School programme will draw almost exclusively on Reggio principles, and these students will move on to our Junior Kindergarten, where this year Ms. Dorken will begin to cultivate our Reggio practice with her students. Senior Kindergarten with Ms. Barlow and Mrs. Miller, and Grade One with Ms. Willems, will similarly work Reggio principles into their classrooms. We have created a new position for Reggio, and I know parents will enjoy meeting Leah Pellar, who along with teaching our Pre-School students assumes responsibility for support in our Reggio programme.

It is important to note that Reggio Emilia is less a strict set of educational edicts about what to do and more of ethos about how we treat children and how we can get the best of out of them.

One of the important tenants in Reggio is documenting what students are doing and using this as a benchmark to be shared with students and parents; we are confident that these measures (see principle # 6) will

demonstrate powerful learning outcomes and steady progress.

Our overarching approach at the school is to find the best curriculum and teach to that standard: so for example, we will continue to teach our students the Singapore Math throughout the school because the evidence is overwhelming that this approach brings tangible benefits and mathematical mastery. Strictly speaking, the Singapore Math approach is not part and parcel of Reggio orthodoxy, but we take a pragmatic approach and do what we think is best by our students.

Q: OK, SO LET'S FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIALS: WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

A: We refer you to the 11 Principles of the programme as articulated by Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian school principal, and Reggio architect; these have been cited from the Reggio Emilia website: www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/

11 PRINCIPLES OF THE REGGIO EMILIA PROJECT:

1 CHILDREN ARE ACTIVE PROTAGONISTS IN THEIR GROWING PROCESSES

Children are equipped with extraordinary potentials for learning that are made manifest in an unceasing exchange with the cultural and social context.

Every child is the subject of rights. Every child, individually and in their relations with the group, is a constructor of experiences to which they are capable of attributing sense and meaning.

2 THE “HUNDRED LANGUAGES”

Children as human beings, possess a hundred languages: a hundred ways of thinking, expressing, understanding, of encountering otherness through a way of thinking that weaves together and does not separate the various dimensions of experience. The hundred languages are a metaphor for the extraordinary potentials of children, their knowledge-building and creative processes, the myriad forms with which life is manifested and knowledge is constructed.

It is the responsibility of the infant-toddler centre and the preschool to valorise all verbal and non-verbal languages with equal dignity

3 PARTICIPATION

Participation is the educational strategy that is constructed and lived in encounter and relations day after day. Participation valorises and makes use of the hundred languages of children and human beings, understood as plurality of points of view and of cultures.

Participation generates and informs the feelings and culture of solidarity, responsibility and inclusion, and produces change and new cultures.

4 LEARNING AS A PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTION, SUBJECTIVE AND IN GROUPS

Every child, like every human being, is the constructor of knowledges (sic) competencies, and autonomies.

The process of learning privileges research strategies, exchange and discussion, and participating with others.

“To make a lovable school, industrious, inventive, liveable, documentable and communicable, a place of research, learning, re-cognition and reflection, where children, teachers and families feel well - is our point of arrival.”

LORIS MALAGUZZI

5 EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Research is one of the essential dimensions of life for children and adults, the tension towards knowledge to be recognized and valorised. Priority is given to research between adults and children as an everyday praxis, a necessary attitude for interpreting the complexity of the world, and a powerful instrument of renewal in education.

Research, made visible through documentation, constructs learning, reformulates knowledge, is at the foundation of professional quality, and on national and international levels it becomes an element and guarantor of pedagogical innovation.

6 EDUCATIONAL DOCUMENTATION

Documentation is an integral part of the educational theories and practices and gives them structure.

It renders the nature of learning processes visible and evaluable, subjective and in groups, in children and in adults, and turns them into a shared common legacy.

7 PROGETTAZIONE/DESIGNING

Educational action is shaped through progettazione/designing of didactics, of environments, of participation, of the professional growth of personnel, and not by means of applying pre-defined programmes.

Progettazione/design is realized through the close synergy between how work is organised and educational research.

8 ORGANISATION

The organisation of work, of spaces, of the times of children and adults, are structurally part of the values and choices of the educational project.

The organising constructs a network of responsibilities that are co-shared at the levels of administration, politics, and pedagogy. Working conditions and forms of contract that are conducive to stability, continuity, and a sense of belonging acquire particular relevance.

9 ENVIRONMENT AND SPACES

The interior and exterior spaces of the infant-toddler centres and preschools are designed and organised in interconnected forms, and are offered to children and adults as places to live together and research. The environment interacts, modifies, and takes shape in relation to the projects and learning experiences, in a constant dialogue between architecture and pedagogy.

Care of the furniture, the objects, and the activity spaces is an educational act that generates psychological wellbeing, a sense of familiarity and belonging, aesthetic sense, and the pleasure of inhabiting. These are also primary premises and conditions for safety in the environments, a quality generated by dialogue and shared elaboration between the different professional profiles who have to concern themselves and take care of this aspect.

documentation, participation by families and the local community, and participation in the city's integrated public system.

NEXT STEPS AND LEARNING MORE ABOUT REGGIO EMILA:

Our early years and kindergarten teachers have been preparing diligently through the summer to hit the ground running, including reading, study, and attending a Reggio conference on line at a Toronto Reggio school; one of our biggest take aways was that the very act of cultivating this more child centered approach leads to greater mastery of learning and relationships; this is perhaps counter intuitive to the idea that the teacher/adult knows best and hence our job is inculcation.

One of things that comes to mind is that Reggio Emilia, like its far better known counterpart Montessori, both grew out of Italy. This is no coincidence: Italians have always celebrated family life and children, and intergenerational families are common there in a way they are

not in Northern Europe, the United States, or Canada. Also not surprisingly, Italy has far better health outcomes (lower depression, lower substance abuse, higher life expectancy) than the contiguous countries it borders. Of course, we're not in the business of making wholesale socioeconomic conclusions, but there is a civility in the Reggio program that cultivates rather than inculcates.

Or to put it another way, when we respect children's independence and unique characters, their education and flourishing repays everyone many fold.

Adam de Pencier, Head of School,

Leah Pellar, Reggio/Pre-School Teacher

Kim Dorken, Junior Kindergarten/Director of Admissions

Kim Barlow, Senior Kindergarten

Liz Miller, Senior Kindergarten

Mikaela Willemse, Grade One

10 FORMATION/ PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Professional growth/formation is the right and duty of single workers and of the group, included and considered as part of the working hours, and collegially organised in content, form, and each single person's ways of participating.

Professional development is developed in the synergy between staff 'update' meetings in single preschools and infant-toddler centres, the plan for formation/professional growth in the city's system of educational services, and educational and cultural opportunities in the city, nationally and internationally.

11 EVALUATION

Evaluation is a process that structures the experience of education and of running the schools, part of every aspect of school life, and understood as a public act of dialogue and interpretation.

With this objective in mind the infant-toddler centres and preschools are equipped with tools – the Charter of Services, the City Childhood Councils, the pedagogical coordination group, the school collective work group, and the co-presence of co-responsible and co-entitled workers – and with practices, such as

