

## A GLOBAL LEARNING JOURNEY –

### Study Tour of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Education

My interest in the Reggio Emilia approach began around 1997 when I was working in Canberra as a preschool teacher and met a much older and more experienced teacher who had just been on a study tour of this little town in Italy, to learn about their philosophy. I had heard and read a little about Loris Malaguzzi and his 100 Languages of Children statement as part of the philosophy, but that is where my knowledge stayed for many years. At that time in my career, it didn't seem relevant to me or my pedagogy and to be very honest, I didn't really understand what it all meant.

As teaching trends and methods change and are influenced just like other professions, I was searching for methods and philosophies that better matched my own growing confidence as a teacher. Here, is where my interest was again piqued. Around 2004, I read about the Emergent Curriculum approach being used in early childhood education and the move away from teacher led focus to a more child led focus. After many years of feeling constrained by ticking boxes and “thinking up” experiences to “teach to” a group of very young children, it made great sense to me that children actually knew what they were interested in and working side by side with them seemed to make much more sense.

We began to introduce this Emergent Curriculum approach to Elder St ECHC around 2006. I read anything I could find about the origins of many of the components that were used in the Emergent Curriculum approach. Observation of children via photography accompanying anecdotal notes, daily journals, documenting the children's learning in an ongoing story format and working with the children as co constructors. Everything I read, everywhere I turned, every method we introduced, had it's origins in the approach of Reggio Emilia and led us back to this philosophy and work of Loris Malaguzzi.

It seems that over many years, this approach has been taken into the Australian context of early childhood education in bits and pieces. The stand out components of the use of natural materials, light, art, the classroom being described as the third teacher and therefore the aesthetics of the room being highly valued, have floated to the top and gained our attention. Hence many services have happily proclaimed that they are “doing Reggio”. Whilst I believe all early childhood education services are doing what they believe is their best at interpreting this approach and delivering it within the Australian context, (this includes our service also) I feel strongly that to do the children, the approach and ourselves as teachers justice, we need to understand the very meaningful and historically rich story of where this approach began. I believe that understanding this comprehensively and not just skimming off the obviously beautiful components of this approach, is when as teachers, we will be able to offer children very deep and rich learning experiences, the families and community the opportunity to see and understand the importance of early years learning and as teachers, for us to develop a true belief in how important our roles are and how imperative it is that we see children as capable, competent and deserving of our attention and what they have to say. We need to slow down and listen.

So in the true sense of the approach of Reggio Emilia, one that believes history is not just about



nostalgia but holds important meaning and relevance, I felt it was necessary to establish a beginning point and history of my journey of learning before I share what I have continued to learn recently. This is a fluid process, I will never be finished learning about this educational approach or any other. This is what I love most about education.

From many, many pages of notes taken during the week of lectures and reading, I have gathered what I felt most relevant to share into 9 headings. I

A very excited educator at the front of the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre

have also sourced information from the

brochures, text books and discussions during question time when I visited the Infant-Toddler and Preschool services of Reggio Emilia. I have organised them into the following areas; a brief recount of the **History of the Reggio Emilia approach, The Environment and the REMIDA project, the Atelier, Professional Development, Documentation and the Progettazione, Participation, Image of the Child**. I will also explain how the study tour organised by Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange (REAIE) is conducted and my experiences visiting the centres and talking with the teachers in the centres.

## **THE HISTORY OF THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH**

“The history of the Reggio Emilia’s municipal infant-toddler centre and preschool education is long, courageous and at the same time delicate” Reggio Children Foundation 2010

In 1945, after the destruction of World War II the people of Villa Cella (a small town just outside Reggio Emilia) sell an abandoned German war tank and a few of the German soldier’s trucks and horses. The men of Reggio Emilia want to use the money to buy tools to begin industrial work, however the woman of Reggio Emilia want to use the money to build a school for the children. After much debate, the women win the vote and become the creators of the first parent-run school. Land was donated by a farmer, bricks and wood are salvaged from bombed houses and the work was volunteered by all. A young teacher by the name of Loris Malaguzzi hears of the events taking place and rushes over on his bicycle to offer his help in the project. (Malaguzzi; 1998)

Education during this time was still heavily controlled by the Catholic church. In the 1963 the municipality of Reggio Emilia started its own network of services for education and opened the Robinson Preschool followed in 1964 by the Anna Frank Preschool. At the time there was no national legislation allowing a municipality to open schools for early years, and a law only arrived in 1968. Also during the 1960s there was a rise in female employment with a need for early childhood services, this followed a growing awareness of social rights.

During this time there was great challenge for the municipality of Reggio Emilia as the State and Church had previously only allowed control of early education provision by Catholic organisations. “The ground was laid in Reggio for the birth of an exciting educational project. The municipal council of Reggio Emilia, controlled by a left wing party, was the first in Italy to set up its own services for early education where highly motivated educators participated with courageous parents in starting a challenging and inspiring project which continues today” (Giamminuti, 2013)

By 1972 after many challenges and long debate with many different community voices, Reggio city council approved the new rulebook for preschools. This is how the original vision of Reggio Emilia education was structured: “permanent professional development for all workers, the organisation of deeply collegial and relational work with the establishment of Pedagogical Co-ordinating Team and the co-presence of two teachers, the important environment as a truly educational interlocutor, the presence of the atelier and the atelierista (artist in permanent residence), priority right of access for children with disabilities, the introduction of male school staff, and an intense involvement in management by families and citizens”. (Reggio Children Foundation)

All these features identified and supported a global educational project for 0-6 year olds which was founded on the image of children equipped with potential and subject to rights, promoting their formation through development of their languages. With Loris Malaguzzi the theory of the one hundred languages of children took shape and developed. (the hundred languages representing all areas of learning, music, art, maths etc with no one language being more important than the other).

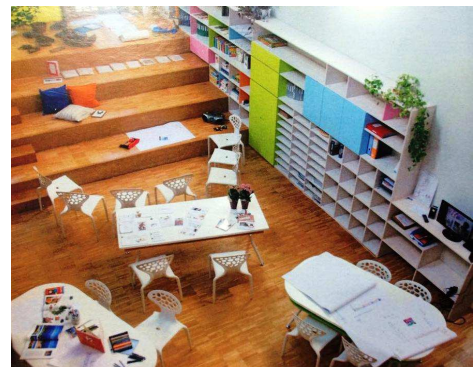


Today the Reggio Emilia educational project consists of a growing network of 22 schools and 13 infant-toddler centres and preschools. There is much more to share about the story of how this approach was formed and is so beautifully supported by the city of Reggio Emilia. (please see booklets on display in the centre foyer). The Reggio Emilia educational project, with all its beauty and gentleness has faced many challenges. During my week in Reggio, the teachers and pedagogistas often referred to these “difficulties and challenges” faced by them, both historically and still today.

This shared sense of solidarity to those attending the conference, was wonderfully received, as to know that even though the project has come so far and is held in such high esteem, there are always challenges to face. They also constantly referred to the value, beauty and joy contained within each challenge. Describing and seeing them as another opportunity for relationships to grow, interactions to explore and new ways and learning to emerge. I need to remind myself of this everyday. One of Malaguzzi’s most famous quotes is after all... “nothing without joy!”

## **THE ENVIRONMENT & THE REMIDA PROJECT**

The environments of the Reggio Emilia Infant and Toddler Centres and Preschools are quite simply beautiful. There is light, volume and space. However what can’t be seen through a photograph is the feeling of serenity and peace that you experience when you enter the buildings. Even with children in the space, there is obviously noise, movement and interaction, but the feelings of great calm co-exists within this. The environment as described during my course was “a system of relations between the protagonist and the educational experience” (Lanzi, 2015) and that there is a constant dialogue between pedagogy and architecture. Pedagogista, and previously a teacher in the Reggio Emilia schools, Daniela Lanzi encouraged us to take the focus away from the beauty first seen and instead to “refocus on the beauty of the relations within the spaces”. She described the exchange of values shared with the architecture. “Interior and exterior spaces of the infant-toddler centres and preschools are designed and organised into interconnected forms that foster interaction, autonomy, explorations, curiosity and communication, and are offered as places for the children and for the adults to research and live together” (Reggio Children, 2010)

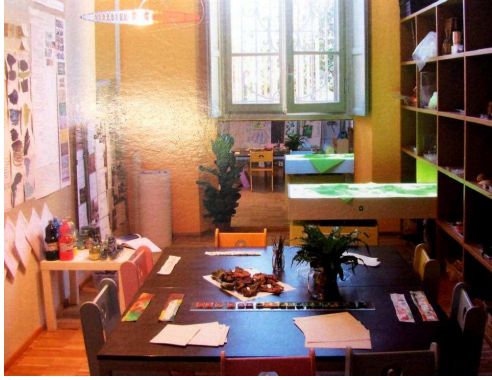


What struck me most within the environments was the freedom the children had to move from room to room. Simona, the 3-4 yr old teacher explained this freedom as being “linked to the image of the child – if we give the children value and see the child as able to choose, the child will act in harmony accordingly”. There are spaces with provocations and experiences set up for the children in each area, the atelier, the shared welcome piazza, verandahs, classrooms etc. The children (2-6yrs) are able to



move freely between these spaces. The children are engaged in the spaces and show great respect for all the materials. They move things and manipulate things and then they put them back! This astounded me and to be honest, at first I was sceptical that it wasn’t more adult led. After discussion with the teachers, it was explained to me that the children (who all attend 5 days per week) have an understanding of the special relationships they have with the materials. They help to set up, the teachers constantly remind the children of the preciousness and communal effort to obtain the materials, their fragility and work with them to engage with the materials in ways that can only leave the children using such materials in a sustainable and respectful way.



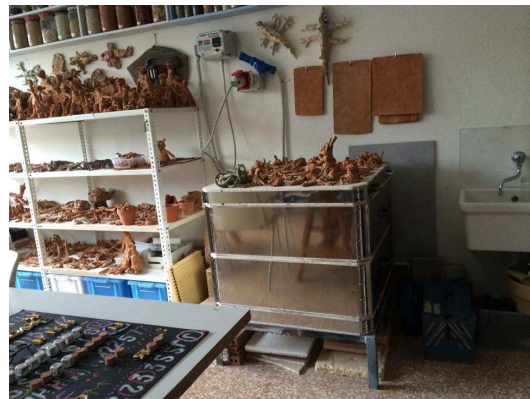


Children as young as 2 years of age understand and respect the work of others. The systems of organisation of materials, aesthetics, time and relationships are not just a discussion between adults, it is a constant shared discussion with the children. The view of each child is one that sees them as strong, capable and important. This is very evident and reflected in all the environments of the infant-toddler centres and preschools. Materials and resources that the children engage with are almost 100% recycled loose parts. The community of Reggio Emilia has a recycling centre

organised just for the infant-toddler centres and preschools called REMIDA. Remida is described as “a cultural project, a message for sustainability” (Lanzi, 2015). The Remida project is housed in a large warehouse close to the centre of Reggio Emilia. There are tonnes of extremely well organised donated materials from businesses in the area. The donations are of all sorts of materials which are cleaned, categorised and displayed with beauty, then made available for the centres to attend and restock. Scraps are seen as having beauty and able to generate reflection and have educational value. There are 18 Remida Project centres worldwide. Australia is part of this project and our Remida Project can be found in Perth. They describe the work of the project as having a “focus on empathy and solidarity with the surrounding world” (Lanzi, 2015)

## **THE ATELIER**

Loris Malaguzzi explained that Ateliers are workplaces assembled where children’s hands are never bored as there are many resources. They are places of research but not a lab to learn any particular artistic technique. Each service has an in-house Atelierista who is an artist in residence working in the main atelier on projects with the children. The artist’s speciality can be any discipline of the arts, ie, musician, graphic artist, ceramicist, painter etc. They work with the teachers and children everyday in creating the wonderful documentations of ongoing project work. The spaces are always very ordered, with lots of clean equipment. Beauty is very important to the child’s developing brain. Each centre’s atelier is linked to the exhibitions of work carried out by the children that are shown around the city of Reggio Emilia. They are linked to the documentation panels around the centre’s walls. It is important to ensure the praxis (theory and practice) within the exhibitions are connected to the ateliers where the work took place. The exhibitions are not art exhibitions, but more a display and communication of concepts and ideas that the children shared with their teachers and atelierists’ through their play.



Each centre also has their own pottery kiln where all the children’s clay work is fired. Care of the furniture, the objects, and the activity spaces by the children and the adults is an educational act that generates psychological wellbeing, a sense of familiarity and belonging, aesthetics and the pleasure of inhabiting a space, which are primary premises and conditions for the safety of the environments. Risk prevention is balanced carefully with the richness and quality of the opportunities offered. (Reggio Children, 2010)

## **Anecdotal observations of the environments and materials during my visits:**

Each room has several mirrors, both fixed and moveable in place and used in their play. There are multiple, different sized light boxes and tables in every room, even one in the baby’s cot rooms. Each centre has a Welcome Piazza, large atelier and each classroom has a smaller adjacent atelier. The use of low platforms and nests of platforms is used throughout the centres. These are used to display

ongoing projects and also more incidental daily work. They use many discovery tables (child height benches with a small lip around the edge to contain materials such as sand, dirt or simple materials to display work). The spaces have many windows that create light filled play spaces. All buildings are mainly double volume (double storey) with internal mezzanine levels for sleeping and play areas. These mezzanines are accessed via stairs with adjacent slides (these are very popular). Most of the centre classrooms have amphitheatre style seating steps where the groups gather to discuss projects, have large group experiences and also play on.

Each centre has a communal dining area outside the kitchen. The children eat as a whole group during lunch time. The tables are set beautifully by the kitchen staff and any children who would like to help (when I was in attendance they had 3 helpers of mixed ages). They use ceramic crockery and glass drinking utensils. They do not eat their lunch in their individual rooms but often have a progressive buffet style morning tea of fruit and bread in their rooms for morning and afternoon tea times. The outdoor areas are very different to ours in Australia. Due to their climate, most centres have simple grassed areas with very little equipment or resources outside. Maybe a fixed climbing frame and some bikes, but mainly just smallish open areas. Some of the newer centres (circa 2003) have “winter gardens” which are spaces adjoining the classroom that would be best described as large sun rooms - glass windowed areas with brick paved floors. They are still indoors but not inside the classroom.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The teachers of the Reggio Emilia educational approach consider themselves to be in constant ongoing professional development. They do not like to use the word “training” as they believe that implies the teacher is in deficit of a skill. Instead they view all teachers to be full of their own experiences and knowledge to share with each other. The Reggio Emilia educational approach relies heavily on the passion and ongoing professional development of their teachers to continue to work. Their idea of professional development is more meaningful than simply attending a conference or course a couple of times each year. It is about collaborating regularly with their colleagues. As Amelia Gambini, a teacher with the Reggio Emilia schools and now a consultant to Reggio Children so beautifully explained during our meeting “our work is too difficult and too beautiful to do alone”.



Veia Vecci, an atelierista at the Diana School in Reggio Emilia for many, many years shared her knowledge and thoughts on the importance of making the children’s learning visible. What I first thought would be a presentation on art appreciation and project sharing from this amazingly experienced artist, was actually her speaking passionately about the importance of really listening to what the children are trying to tell us in their interactions and behaviours. It surprised me and my fellow conference colleagues that an artist of her calibre would be so invested in the children and so humble about her own achievements.

She explained the importance for all teachers to know children well, be close to them, not just physically close, but close to their knowledge. To understand what children are understanding, doing, using – to look for their use of all the languages (ie, “the languages” refers to the 100 Hundred languages of children). She went on to explain how teachers must see how the children are transmitting knowledge versus listening to the knowledge they are constructing as individuals and within the group. She suggested that we at times interpret information from children as mistakes – it should be seen at the moment of a child’s discovery! In order to understand where children’s knowledge is at we need to ask questions of what we know about children. To do this, we first need to work on the adult, before working on the children. We need to understand our own expectations

and what we feel we could do with the children. Professional development is the key to this! We need to study. Research informs us and keeps us up to date with what is happening around the world and addresses different types of knowledge. Education is continuous research.

The professional development reflections shared by Lucia (another pedagoga for several Reggio Emilia Infant-Toddler and Preschools) was on the dichotomy of the individual and group relations. She shared that what they believed was important was that teachers create the conditions to build a group of children and grant conditions of life that have many different facets of life within the group. (Lucia, 2015) Difference is beautiful and it is hard to find the balance. All of us need relations with others, we need dialogue and exchange - this is not easy to measure. Lucia referred to this paradigm as the “aesthetics of being a teacher”.

During professional development time, Reggio teachers discuss what is happening with the group and the observational tools they are using. They also discuss very deeply the preparation of the context and how they can offer children multi disciplinary approaches and possibilities. To be able to work with the knowledge the children already have and how it can be related to the group. To investigate deeply within one discipline to discover other areas of knowledge in other languages to allow for deep research and investigation.

During project work, this is what the teachers do. As explained again by Lucia “we make mistakes, we build experiences and we know there are many different ways we could explore.” (2015)

My reflections on these lectures on professional development during the study tour and now weeks afterwards as I decipher my notes, are that even though the teachers of Reggio Emilia schools rely on educational research and theory, they are always drawn back to the knowledge of the child as the most important. They then apply theory to this knowledge to continue to co construct with the children. They are continually pushing themselves to know more, understand more and most importantly share these thoughts, reflections and theories with each other, the children and the families.

The adult is not external but part of the child building context and researching. The adult must acknowledge the children’s skills and knowledge to understand what is happening. As an educator this is teaching me to let go of the idea of knowing everything or finding the one truth. As described so eloquently by Dewey and Malaguzzi, we need to “let go of some old certainties in order to grow and be challenged to change for the better.” (Lindsay 2008b, 16)

## **DOCUMENTATION**

During the introductory lectures given during the study tour, a question was posed to us when the topic of documentation began. “How do we create context for making meaning?” The simple answer was - we need to listen! I found this to be a powerful statement as a teacher. I believe that I don’t listen effectively and I am in way too much of a hurry to add my thoughts or ideas. Every time the teachers of Reggio Emilia want to work with the children to understand a concept and make meaning, they don’t turn to themselves for the answer, they turn to the children and they listen. Documentation helps teachers listen. From the many vignettes watched of children learning and playing, it is clear that no matter how old the child, the ability to listen is there. We need to listen and interpret what the children are saying with their words, their bodies, their art, their behaviours – the whole 100 languages of children. Documentation allows teachers to revisit this listening which is what gives us the meaning making. We all agree that there is never enough time to make sense of all that happens in a classroom as it occurs. This is why documentation is important as a tool for listening.

The teachers of Reggio Emilia described documentation as the “heritage of the words and images of working with children”. These words and images can then activate many types of listening when working with children. Documentation was described by Lanzi (2015) as the “DNA of our educational experience” and that it is interesting only when visible and when it becomes democratic.

Historically, the journey of making this learning visible was approached by Loris Malaguzzi in an unconventional way. When he was teaching, he would pack a truck of resources and drive it to the middle of town and set it up with the teachers and children of the school. The children would then engage in their usual work of the day; clay work, painting, constructing etc, in the main Piazza of the town. The citizens of the town were drawn to the area. They would ask questions and the event was always welcomed with joy by the citizens. This is the practice in Reggio Emilia that continues to happen today. The children's learning is documented and shared with the whole community.

In recent times, Reggio Children have travelling exhibitions all around the world that are still ensuring that the learning and documentation continue to be visible. The reasoning behind this is to help the community understand how early learning works and to send a message to the children "you are valued citizens". Giving children rights also teaches social responsibility and participation as meaningful citizens.



The topic of Documentation was addressed again during lectures held later in the week of the study tour. Documentation was explained as the holder of cultural heritage, a review of meaning of different contexts and as a research of meanings that comes with us through life. Lucia quotes the work of Bruner when stating that for adults and children to understand means to construct reality and give a meaning. According to the Reggio Emilia educational approach, documentation is the fundamental strategy to achieve this.

Documentation:

represents a strategy to listen

a mutual relationship for children/adults and context

is an ongoing process that is fluid and not "at the end"

the fundamental starting point of documentation is the image of the child

during documentation the adult is not external to the process but a part of the child building context and researching

listening is more than hearing – silence, or when adults don't feel compelled to talk all the time is "where the big air is" - this big air time can lead to the production of dialogue which leads to learning.

To activate this dynamic between teachers and children we need to understand that when we are not "teaching" anymore, is when learning together occurs.

Reggio Emilia schools welcome many different subjectivities and dialogue and allows them to dialogue within the individual and the group. Documentation allows us to collect clues as we can't rely on memory alone. Documentation is a tool for solidarity and respect for children. Documentations are partial documents as we cannot understand everything that happens. This is the reason that we need teacher collaboration as it allows for all contributors to gather thoughts. Documentation starts as soon as thoughts are considered to be offered to the children by the teachers.

During the early stages of the documentation process when starting a project, the teachers ask themselves questions such as, what are the various directions we could go? What and how should we observe? The observation tools/methods that are used are always a teacher choice and not directed or instructed by anyone else. There are times when the Reggio Emilia teachers are concerned as they are not ever sure of the right choice. Carla Rinaldi suggested that no matter what choice teachers make to follow the documentation process, "make sure the choice is based around love."

## PROGETTAZIONE & THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Daniela Lanzi began on day two of the conference to discuss the “Progettazione”. It is important to note that the teachers of Reggio Emilia explained to us that there is no suitable translation to English that they feel fully explains the Italian word Progettazione. In action it can be best understood as the project work that they undertake with the children, also via Google translate it can be explained as meaning “to design”. From hearing and seeing the project work that is undertaken with the children, I can see that the word project would not be 100% appropriate as a project usually has a pre determined end product, whilst design is more apt as it allows for an ongoing process to be a bigger part of the story. I like to understand the word to mean ongoing design projects co constructed by children and adults.

One explanation that was given during the course of what Progettazione means was to predict, to hypothesise with flexibility and to project work ahead. I have also read a description which is “the process of planning and designing the teaching and learning activities, the environment, the opportunities for participation, and the professional development of the personnel, and not by means of applying predefined curricula” (Reggio Children, 2010, 12)

Pedagogista, Marina Castagnetti explained to us that each country will make their own choice of a pedagogical model and therefore decide what kind of skills they acknowledge that the child has or doesn't have. Teachers should ask themselves, what type of school would I like for the child? What type of pedagogy do I choose for that particular child? Education is a situation of research and research always produces another pedagogy. Pedagogy needs to be understood as permanent movement, and that of a journey discovered while we are travelling and moving.

The child is a small human being that will grow and develop their own potential. The Reggio Emilia educational approach challenges the idea that children are fragile and weak and asks us to research these questions:

What type of role do children play in contemporary society?”

Is a child a weak subject that only parents care for or the whole community cares for?

Is a child a citizen of the present, or only the future?

Our reflections on the image of the child are influenced by socio-cultural contexts. The work of Loris Malaguzzi was to exchange ideas on these questions with other theorists.

The Reggio Emilia image of the child was described as follows by Marina:

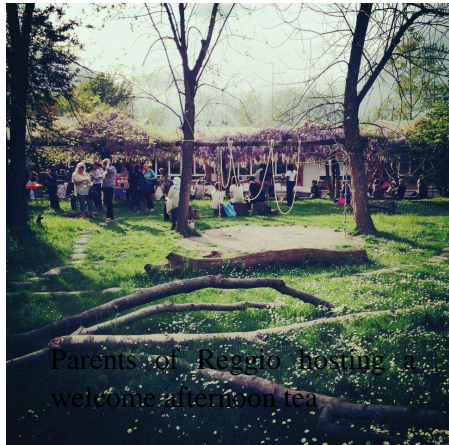
It reflects a concept of competence. Competence is in existence from our own genetic heritage and ability to build relationships with the world. They build their image based on observing children's capacity to relate to the world, peers and materials. Children are unique with powerful and strong subjectivity. Children are asking to be welcomed, respected and listened to. Children require a teacher to create a relationship with them as they are very young. According to neuroscience theories children's brains are dynamic and experience the most growth during their early years, it is during this phase that our brains are most receptive. Early childhood teachers therefore have a huge responsibility to offer them experiences to make meaning and build relationships with their world. (2015)

How can teachers build this for children? A pedagogy of listening is so vital for children. The listening needs to be sensitive and consistent. We need to ask ourselves as educators, do we really believe what children are telling us is important? Do we really believe children can move our point of view?

The explanations of the image of the child were thought provoking and centring. I find myself coming back to question my image of the child very regularly, especially the questions posed by the



teachers of Reggio Emilia. I believe in our Australian context the biggest obstacle we need to overcome when considering the image of the child is time. The Italians constantly referred to their “relationship with time”. They reminded us to travel gently and slowly, provide time to think and reflect and allow the children time to revisit, practice, think and respond. On reflection, it seems that our experiences here are rushed into and out of again. Why? What are we trying to achieve? What can the children achieve in this short amount of time? The documentations and progettazione in Reggio Emilia schools, in comparison to ours, usually just start gaining momentum where we normally move onto a new topic. Time seems to be the missing element in our Australian context. I believe a provision of time will allow for listening and deep understanding of the children’s knowledge.



**Experiences during my time with the children and teachers of the Reggio Emilia Infant-Toddler Centres and Preschools** I was able to visit one Infant-Toddler Centre and two Preschools during my study tour. The first was Iotti Infant Toddler Centre and Preschool and was from 3pm to 5.30pm. This was my first experience of being inside a Reggio Emilia centre and most of the children were either outside or had gone home. As there were not children using the space with the teachers at this time, I used my time at this centre to mainly reflect on the space as described at the beginning of the report.

The second school was Balducci Municipal Preschool. I visited this centre in the morning between 9am and 12.00pm, and the centre was in full operation. The third centre I visited was Allende Preschool and we visited this centre in the afternoon and there were children present but it was family grouping time, so less children than in the middle of the day.

My observations of the children’s interactions are mainly taken from my time at the Balducci Municipal Preschool and from discussions with teachers at the Allende Municipal Preschool.

**Note:** There are very strict rules around the taking of photos in any Reggio Emilia Schools. It is prohibited to take photos of any of the children, indoor environments or documentation. They do however, permit photography of the outdoor environments and sketches of learning areas. In the place of photography they do have publications created by each school that are available to purchase. These publications are the same publications that are given to the parents of the children to show them the projects the children have been working on. The children do not have individual port folios like we keep, but there are notes taken of observations of how each child is involved in the group that is recorded and discussed with parents during meetings (more information on this is the Parent Participation section of this paper) and also used as discussion points for teachers and pedagogistas during project meetings.

#### Balducci Municipal Preschool

Information was gained via a presentation and informal question time with Simona, the 5 year old room teacher, Daniela, the school’s pedagogista and Phillip, the school’s artelierista (musician).

4 classes – 3 age based rooms and 1 mixed group of 4 and 5 year olds.

Open 7.30am (as needed) or mainly 8am and closes at 4pm or 4.30 as needed.

26 children in each class, 2 teachers to each group and 4 extra teachers throughout the school for special rights children. There are also kitchen staff and 3 auxiliary staff (cleaners, gardeners etc)

The centre opened in 1992. Balducci was a friend of Loris Malaguzzi and a priest who shared common ideas on mankind. He was a planetary man without boundaries of religion or culture. He had a new idea of humanity without violence, a place of peace. The centre itself was designed with the idea of the environment being the third teacher. The design was a collaboration of teachers, architects, families and children. The main characteristics of the building are that it is 2 floors and each classroom has “double volume” – two levels. The second floor in each room is for research and also a place for sleep. This organisation allows for small group work. There is also a large empty space for morning assembly. All classes have ateliers, with one main atelier for the whole centre and a mini atelier. It was explained that these help the children achieve the 100 languages every day. Each space is linked to a particular project. The kitchen is very important as its own project.

The Piazza is very important in each school as it allows a place to meet as there are also in the cities of Reggio Emilia and surrounding areas. It is seen as a cultural place to share life stories. Piazza is a metaphor for exchange of information.

The Piazza had a beautiful provocation displayed with many tiered platforms with clay sculptures and natural elements such as small and large tree logs and off cuts of wood. I wondered if the children were allowed to manipulate and move these items at will. Almost as I was thinking about this, Daniela mentioned that it takes great collaboration with the children and teachers to keep the Piazza as it appears. How would this look in practice?

**3 year room** – projects at the moment are most linked to the outdoor garden area, especially the vegetable garden this season. The focus is on growing veggies with all the people of the school, parents, grandparents etc. Their work is mainly of water colours depicting plants and flowers. The day we visited the 3 year old group was out at swimming lessons.

**4 year room** – working on understanding the body and movement. The teacher is working on body movement with the children using clay. In the mini atelier the teacher is working with the children on vegetable metaphors and imagining vegetables in wider or different contexts.

**4-5 year room** – part of the class will come upstairs with the teacher to the landscape atelier (large empty room with just a web cam, music playing and a data projector showing a scene of a landscape and projecting light and the children’s moving images onto the wall.) The children are working on interpretation of body movement using technology tools. Another small group will work outside working on colours, considering our territory, landscape, season etc. (This was seen as children painting at easels under a large cherry blossom tree (many of these trees are in bloom in the area in April) painting images and understandings of the cherry blossom tree).

**5 years room** – working in strong connection with the atelier – a project called Resonance – about music and instruments and representing musicians using clay and graphics. The teachers explained that we would see 2 small groups of children watching video footage of musicians, one group working with clay, one group working on graphics/drawing (group of 4 children in total). Also a project of working on building a clay orchestra. In the mini atelier they are working on a sound map – this came from a walk the children took and representing the sounds they found outside. The children work with producing sound, live music and recorded music. They school has software for sound recording etc in their main atelier with Phillipe.

During my time at Balducci Municipal Preschool I was most interested in seeing the relationship between the children and teachers and the children and the materials that we had heard so much about during our conference lectures.

## THE ORGANISATION OF THE DAY

The main part of the day within the schools begins at 9am with Morning Assembly. This is where the children and teachers gather in their room to decide what the children will be working on that morning. The teachers have already set out the tables and project work whilst the children were at the early stage of arrival and family grouping between 8am and 9am. The children discuss and decide who will work where and who will be in each group. The image of the child is shown clearly during this important group meeting. All children are heard and the

teachers support where necessary. If the children decide

they would like to play somewhere other than the designated areas then that is also possible. As the work is so engaging and the children are very invested, they will almost always decide to join a project group. This experience gives the children the right to choose, the right to decide, the right to be heard and the right to belong. With these rights, also come responsibilities. These are taken seriously by the children and as a commitment to the group.

As the children move to begin their work, the teachers support, discuss, observe and take notes for the ongoing documentation of the projects.

I asked one of the teachers about the detail I had observed in one of the drawings that a child had been working on that day. I wanted to know how a three year old child was able to spend so much time

doing a drawing of a clay sculpture and asked her what happens if a child only wants to stay at a table for a small amount of time and then move off to somewhere else. The teacher's response was that the children do have the choice to move away, but after they have met their responsibility to the group commitment that they made at the morning assembly. She explained that the children take this commitment very seriously. I asked what she would say to a child in this time. She responded that she would say "you decided at morning assembly that you were going to work on this project with your friends, they need your ideas and input. Can you come and show me some more work that you could do on this drawing?" The other point she made is that if the child approached another table where the children were already working, they may be met by the other children asking them "why are you here? You decided to work on the drawing table". The other children may not allow the child to enter that area that soon.

I found this very interesting. I welcome the idea of coupling rights with responsibility in the very young child. I feel that young children in our Australian context are given lots of freedom and rights to choose, but lack the follow up and structure of understanding their responsibilities to the community. I believe this approach will grow children that feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves and a deeper connection with how their actions can impact others. The approach is not just about telling a child "no", it is about continuing the beautiful connection with the group they committed to working with. To see their contributions as valued and needed. I believe this is where the calm, connected and peaceful environment is created.

I entered the 4 year old room and saw a smallish room that was very busy with children sitting or standing around tables engaged in experiences. The children were cautiously interested in the visitors on the study tour and smiled and giggled when I introduced myself to them in English saying "Bonjourno, my name is Mel". They all replied in Italian and asked me if I spoke Italian. They looked a little unimpressed when I said no, only English. One little boy pointed at each child at the table telling me their names and the languages they spoke. I felt a little intimidated only being able to speak one language! They continued on with their work as I stood back observing them. During this time I learnt that the children had agreed at morning assembly to work at the cutting and pasting table.



The other areas of work were a number game and some painting at easels outside (the landscape/plants project mentioned earlier).

Out in the main Piazza I observed a child walking around the large provocation of tree stumps, logs, clay work and dinosaurs. This set up covered a large space in the Piazza and was laid out beautifully with a thin a circle of up to 20 tree log biscuit, with a clay piece and dinosaur on each one. The circle met up with a large hollowed out tree stump with more dinosaurs around it. Adjoining this was a series of tiered platforms with more logs, clay work, sticks etc arranged. Next to the platforms were baskets of fired clay lumps and other natural loose parts. I was very interested at the beautiful set up in the Piazza and really wanted to see children engaging in this space.

After a few minutes I noticed a little girl around 3 years of age approach the area. She walked around the outside of the circle of dinosaurs with her hands behind her back, looking at the materials. She eventually stopped near the large hollowed out log and started playing with a dinosaur. She played alone for about 5 minutes and then a friend came and joined her. This little boy looked around 4 years old and picked up a dinosaur from the circle and joined the little girl. The children played with several of the dinosaurs moving them around. They rearranged the set up a little and added more clay lumps to their play for food for the dinosaurs. Their play was mostly familiar, happy and engaged. The two children moved back and forth from the area and used and moved whatever they wanted.

Teachers passed by and responded if the children spoke to them. After approximately 20 minutes the children began putting the clay pieces back in the basket, putting the dinosaurs back in the area first found and then moved onto another area.

Other areas of play were mainly taking place within on discovery tables made from wood with a small lip around the edge so materials could be arranged on the top without fall off. The children had small containers with many different types of natural materials in each. These were flowers, clay pieces, small wood pieces, little tree nuts, seeds, pods and larger pieces of wood. About 3 children stood around this discovery table on a verandah just outside the building and quietly chatted and made designs. Our translator Paulo told me what the children were discussing as they worked. A little girl was making a scene with the materials and told her friends, this is the sky and the sun, these are growing out of the ground like in our vegetable garden. A little boy that was working along side her decided he wanted to tell me what he was doing in very fast Italian. Mid sentence he stopped, pointed to his t-shirt and said “this is Batman!” – that I understood! He ran off to the grass nearby and came back with a small yellow flower which he gave to his friend, which she added to her landscape scene. He then walked back and chose a small piece of fired clay and spoke to me again in fast Italian. Paulo said to me “he just told you that he was going to add this to his work, and to remember that this is fragile so you need to be very gentle with it”.

All that was discussed and described to us by Simona and Phillippo – the projects and ongoing work could be seen taking place in the school. It seemed quite ordinary, but seeing how much the children were committed to their group and understanding the thought and planning that had taken place to keep these projects going made it all quite extraordinary.

### **Question Time with Simona, Daniela and Fillipo**

**Documentation:** Documentation is difficult but worth the effort as it can be used to relaunch ideas to the children. Notes are made available to families that day or that week (these are the observations, planning notes and daily journal) Teachers own notes are also shared with the pedagogistas and atelieristas. The notes are then collected in a folder/diary. Over time the notes are re-elaborated to families/visitors/community – and then turn into documentation/publications.

Materials become visible but first it is revisited then become other forms of documentation – that could be a power point presentation, then offered to the families to watch during a family evening or meetings etc. This then becomes the memory of the centre. Daniela put documentation into



perspective when she again shared with us that it is hard work but in the words of Loris Malaguzzi “nothing without joy”, and encouraged us to find the joy in the work.

When asked about individual documentation Filippo was shocked and puzzled at the thought. He responded to the question about doing individual documentations for each child by saying “It would be impossible to give a single example of documentation and it would not make any sense!” This resonated with myself and many of my colleagues as we often talk about how much effort is involved in programming individually and also how much context is missing from the learning story when only one child is focused on.

**Calmness of the children in the centre:** Simona shared with us - we have more complicated days sometimes – fighting, arguing. However the interpretation of the fighting is what makes the difference and can help build relationships.

**Respect for space/resources:** Filippo explained – respect is created and shared everyday. Families are involved and work together to create this respect. It is often talked about during meetings with families. It is a community responsibility, not just between teachers and children.

**Parental concerns about safety of materials:** Simona explained – Italian’s also worry about safety and small materials and have many discussions around this. Reggio Emilia teachers do worry but offer the children fun, enjoyable ways to use the materials and as Loris Malaguzzi explained “there is no education without risk”. Risk is reduced to a minimum by talking to the children. There are no age restrictions with children and materials – we believe in giving children free choice. All ages are exposed to materials, we do this as children will find danger in all places.

**Freedom of the children whilst at school:** Daniela explained that it is linked to the image of the child. If we give children value and see the child as able to choose, the child will act in harmony accordingly.

## **FAMILY PARTICIPATION**

“Participation needs care and possibility to develop context every day” – Reggio Emilia Parent

I chose to attend a lecture on the topic of Ethics of citizenship and participation carried out by two pedagogistas and a parent of Reggio Children.

I chose this lecture from others on offer as I feel strongly about having genuine connection with our community and have had this goal in mind for many years and never felt quite authentic in its practice. I am very interested in the notion of true Belonging when it comes to all included in our service and challenge our practices that I feel go against that objective.

As is always the practice with these talks, the children are addressed as the main influence. The children understand that the school is a centre of exchange and sharing. Each other’s feelings, knowledge are all exchanged and valued. It is a place where the rights of the individual are valued. A place where parents and teachers build knowledge and create a context which is conducive to develop with adults as well as with children.

The practice of meeting to talk and reflect together arises a kind of civic sense – the sense of belonging to a community. A sense of belonging to the centre and also the wider community. Participation in the Reggio Emilia schools is a long process which involves time, sharing and trust. When trust and sharing combines then ideas come out from parents and then this can be then shared with the wider community.

Welcoming is a vital part of the day. It sets up how the experiences will occur later in the day. How are parents welcomed and at what point does the participation begin. The Reggio Emilia schools believe the participation begins before families start at their centre.

The processes of belonging and welcoming are organised by a first visit to the centre before they join the following year. This happens via Open days. This allows parents to see what they will experience in this context. They are welcome to visit the different centres and free to visit at different times of the day. After this first open day visit, where parents also fill out a request form for which centre they would prefer to attend. (Note; these preferences are not always met and places at centres are not guaranteed). Once they have been offered a position at one of the centres, they progress through the rest of the enrolment process.

The next step is to attend a meeting with the Director and teachers of the room the child will be enrolled in. This meeting is a chance to get to know each other and one of the teachers takes notes on what is discussed. The parents share their expectations, hopes and any concerns and ask lots of questions. The teachers ask similar questions, especially around what the parent's views of educational theory are. This is important to share so there is not a mismatch of expectations. The teachers also explain clearly what the Reggio Emilia education approach will look like and how parents will be expected to be involved. During this meeting the parents are advised that the notes they are taking during this meeting will be used at the next level meeting with all the parents of the room. The comments, ideas, concerns, hopes etc of the parents will be shared with the wider group so all can be clarified and discussed before their child's first day.

The next meeting in a few weeks time takes place as described above, in a group of parents of all the children of that group. This is as much as social as it is information session. All participants are encouraged to contribute, discuss and share. It is important to value the opinion of all parents and this process allows for that opportunity.

Participation is important to forecast the need for time for parents to become comfortable and familiar with the environment, the teachers and other families. It is a complex process mirrored by what children also go through.

The children explained participation as:

“need to share”

“ask what's happening in your life”

“share your ideas and listen to your friend's ideas”

“when you don't agree with the other ideas you need to get your message across”

“need to be patient and understand other's ideas – maybe they are right – it may take 3 days to understand!”

Participation allows to give all a voice and leave a place in the space for everyone.

Parents also meet often with teachers to go through their child's participation and observation notes during project work. If parents cannot attend meetings, they rely on other communication tools such as the daily journal to help them see how their child is progressing. Minutes of all the meetings of the Reggio Children council are also given out to all families to read.

Parents and grandparents are involved in the maintenance and care of the environment, including installing and building new structures etc. Community participation includes visitors, shows, orchestras etc. In return the children learning is shared with the community. The aim is to “flood the city with the children's projects”. Art work of the children is displayed in restaurants etc.

It was expressed by the parents of the lecture when asked about how they felt about not seeing an individual portfolio of their child's work, that as the parents were so involved in their child's learning

and the school, it seemed unnecessary to have such individual information and they would wonder how their child is viewed and interacting within the group.

Words from Reggio Emilia parent of his awe and wonder of being involved in the Reggio schools:

I was always in awe and so moved by the morning assemblies – the children are encouraged to discuss and express opinions on subjects with total freedom of 360 degree sharing. Comparing this with busy modern parents who don't always have time to listen when children stop us, it was such an important and valuable experience for our children to feel valued.

Children can discuss topics and share points of view with others and reflect on what they feel and think. It is the “cradle of democracy” – where it is created, where young children learn to solve problems together and acquire intelligence of approaching issues together.

The experience was such a positive one for me that I decided to continue to be an active member of the Reggio Council and the Dialogue Group that discusses parenting and education issues of Reggio Schools in general. For example, part of my role is to meet candidates for the new mayor in advance to know before the relation to their views on the child and education. We collect signature towards a law to extend the national level of the Reggio approach. Italian fiscal problems are overshadowing the importance of the Reggio approach and there is a risk that decisions will be made to take away early childhood education funds. So politicians may try to change the political system – it is the job of the Reggio Council to protect and advocate the Reggio approach.

“Our Schools are the result of desire – desire is seen as giving a future to our schools and the rights to citizenship of children. To give future value to early childhood experiences and a future to collective intelligence of democracy”

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

“Schools must ask the community and parents to have lucidity about education. Communication with the public must reach beyond the walls of the school. We must send messages to the city, small and large. Messages from our schools that maintain the life of education in our community. “Vea Vecci

I feel a stone in my shoe...just as the study leader of the tour said we might after visiting Reggio Emilia schools. The stone in my shoe represents that slightly uncomfortable feeling I have about how to go about sharing all the components of the Reggio Emilia approach in our little place for children and families in Newcastle NSW, Australia. We do not live in Italy, which even though is a Democratic Republic, has many traits of a quite socialist country. We do not have the same history that the people of Reggio Emilia have after the second world war. Or do we? Are we possibly now as we speak in the fight to bring early childhood education and learning into the place in society that it belongs? Of course we are. There are many facets of the early childhood profession that is still fighting to be heard, just as the Reggio Children council is still fighting to keep their place in government in their own country.

It was also suggested to the Australia delegates of the study tour to not feel like we have to dig up the whole experience and re-plant it in our own contexts. A small yet significant cutting to graft onto our already, as described so beautifully by Amelia Gambini “rich and joyful learning environments” is where we should start.

The reason for this lengthy and quite detailed recount of what I learnt during my one week study tour is so that I can come back to each of the components regularly and re-live the feeling, the passion and the words of the Italian teachers. As educators the word “inspired” is often bandied around. We can be inspired by what others are creating, spaces, experiences etc for children. We can be inspired by early years education blogs, pictures and environments. We can, like myself, of course be inspired by conferences, readings and experiencing the Reggio educational approach in the first person. Where I think we need to refocus our inspiration is from within ourselves. Reflect deeply on what you

believe, not just what you see. Be inspired by ideas, confusion, lack of understanding, progress and change. Be inspired by the children and what they are telling us. Be inspired by the need to know more.

My goal for 2015 as teacher and educational leader is to focus on documentation and project work with our team. To slow down the processes with children and be inspired by listening to their ideas.

For our team to discuss and reflect before we act. To also trial some of the organisational and systematic daily tools within the preschool room to allow the children to have more rights and an understanding of the social responsibilities that accompany those rights.

I am positive I will return to Reggio Emilia and complete another study tour, hopefully with some of our team by my side. Until then, I will try very hard to slowly gather little stones to put in everyone's shoes that have the honour of teaching in the early years.



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## The Hundred Languages



The child is made of one **hundred**.

The child has  
a **hundred** languages  
a **hundred** hands  
a **hundred** thoughts  
a **hundred** ways of thinking  
of playing, of speaking.



A **hundred**.  
Always a **hundred**  
ways of listening  
of marveling, of loving  
a **hundred** joys  
for singing and understanding  
a hundred worlds  
to discover  
a **hundred** worlds  
to invent  
a **hundred** worlds  
to dream.



The child has  
a **hundred** languages  
(and a **hundred hundred hundred** more)  
but they steal ninety-nine.  
The school and the culture  
separate the head from the body.



They tell the child:  
to think without hands  
to do without head  
to listen and not to speak  
to understand without joy  
to love and to marvel  
only at Easter and at Christmas.



They tell the child:  
to discover the world already there  
and of the hundred  
they steal ninety-nine.  
They tell the child:  
that work and play  
reality and fantasy  
science and imagination  
sky and earth  
reason and dream  
are things



that do not belong together.  
And thus they tell the child  
that the **hundred** is not there.  
The child says:  
No way. The **hundred** is there.

-Loris Malaguzzi  
Founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach

