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THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Reggio Emilia is a town in the northern part of Italy. This town gave its name to the school that the families living here built after World War II and the approach they adopted. Reggio Emilia (RE), which is an approach adopted in many countries throughout the world today, has a philosophy centered on children. Reggio Emilia is considered as the preschool education approach of our age and it is considered important because of its compliance to the Ministry of Education preschool education curriculum developed based on multiple intelligence theory and constructivist approach and in terms of the contribution that it will make to curriculum development works in our country. The aim of this study is to examine the Reggio Emilia approach, which emerged in Italy and is an education approach in preschool education, and its qualities, the curriculum and curriculum development process, the roles of teachers and students in it. In addition to that, activity samples based on the approach are also discussed.

Key words: The Reggio Emilia Approach, Preschool Education, Curriculum Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Balat et al. (2011) defined preschool education period as a systematic and conscious educational period which covers the time between the birth of a child and the years that elapsed until the 72th month of his life, which is intended for physical, psychomotor, social, emotional, mental and lingual development of children in this age group in compliance with their individual qualities and development levels, which provides children with environment that are rich in terms of stimulants, which guides them in the best way according to the cultural values and qualities and which takes part in the integrity of the basic education by preparing children to primary education.

Preschool period is the period during which the individual development and education of a person occurs the fastest. Habits, skills and knowledge that a child gained during preschool period will render him successful in the coming years. Benefits of preschool education, which has a very important place in terms of the development and learning of a child, can be realized with quality preschool educational programs. Basic principles and qualities were clearly stated in Preschool curriculum intended for children between 36 to 72 months which was applied by the Ministry of Education in our country. This curriculum renders a teacher free and allows flexibility while it provides guidance in terms of reaching a quality (Alisinanoglu et al., 2011; 11-12).

"Preschool Curriculum for Children between 36 to 72 Months" was tested in 2006 in Turkey and put into use to be developed. Curriculum development works were conducted by taking into consideration the current status analyses made within the scope of the work of the Project for Strengthening Preschool Education, national and international studies in the area and the feedbacks received from the application. Preschool Curriculum was implemented to ensure that children attending preschool educational institutions grow up healthily with rich learning experiences, they reach the highest level by supporting every area of development, they gain self-care skills and they are prepared for the basic education. Curriculum, which is "developmental" since it is based on development levels and qualities of children and it takes basis the development of each developmental area within this context, is "immersive" by nature and it is "eclectic" by model. Basic qualities of the curriculum can be summarized as it follows:

- ✓ It is intended for children between 36 and 72 months.
- ✓ It is centered on children.
- ✓ Objectives and attainments are essential.
- ✓ Developmental qualities are prepared separately for each age group.
- ✓ Subjects are not objective but means.
- ✓ There are no units.

- ✓ It is flexible. It provides teachers with freedom.
- ✓ Creativity is in the foreground.
- ✓ It requires teachers to work in a planned manner.
- ✓ Environments which provide children with free experiences are important.
- ✓ Problem solving and games are basic activities.
- ✓ It should be encouraged to use daily life experience and immediate environment facilities to be used for educational purposes.
- ✓ Importance is given to diverse learning experiences.
- ✓ Participation of the family is important.
- ✓ Assessment process is multi-directional.
- ✓ The curriculum is open to development. (The Ministry of Education, General Directorate of Basic Education, Preschool Curriculum, 2012)

Curriculum to be followed in preschool education changes according to the establishment purpose of the school and the philosophy it has. Some schools use "some curriculums", that is to say, readily written curriculums while some schools develop their "curriculums" in time with the educational philosophy and approach they have. For example, the Reggio Emilia approach predicts a project-based program development, which emerges naturally and which contains teacher's interaction with children. For this reason, teachers getting inspiration from the Reggio Emilia approach find the opportunity to develop curriculums unique for their schools instead of imitating the works conducted in Reggio Emilia schools. On the other hand, ready-made curriculums are implemented in many places throughout the world. These curriculums are mostly developed by taking into consideration needs and conditions of the area. For example, High/Scope curriculum was developed and is still being implemented in United States of America in order to improve the educational status of children living in disadvantaged areas (Alisinanoglu et al., 2011, 11-12).

In addition to traditional methods, modern approaches are also being used in the preschool education today. The fact that modern approaches are delivered in the light of scientific studies makes them preferred more. Some of these approaches are High/Scope, Head Start, Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and Bank Street approaches. Reggio Emilia, which sets an example for society-based education models, is reborn in many countries throughout the world. Europe in particular, it entered education systems of many counties throughout the world in North America, Asia, Australia and other parts of the world.

2. WHAT IS REGGIO EMILIA APPORACH?

Reggio Emilia is a town in the northern part of Italy. This area is the richest and most developed area of Italy with its population of four million people. This area is also the most-developed area of Italy which provides the social aid the most (Cited in Aslan, 2007 from Cadwell, 1997). This approach was supported by Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia city and emerged in preschool education institutions with the participation of families living in the area (Pekdogan, 2012). After the World War II, some families in the village of Villa Cella in Reggio Emilia town of Italy wanted to build a school for their kids and start the building of schools with the money they obtained by selling the tanks, trucks and horses remaining from the war. Reggio Emilia Municipal School was opened with the support of Malaguzzi and the families in question. With this approach, the city of Reggio Emilia was started to be mentioned as "the golden standard" in early childhood education (Cited in Pekdogan, 2012 from New, 2007).

As stated by Malaguzzi, it is underlined in the Reggio Emilia approach, which is the inspiration source of many early childhood pedagogues in the world, that children have 100 languages (the Hundred Languages of Children).

- ✓ "100 languages to discover"
- ✓ "100 languages to invent"
- ✓ "100 languages to imagine"

This means that a child will have many ways to realize himself and express this when the appropriate learning environment was provided. For example, the child expresses himself/herself by painting and reveals his/her emotions while playing. The task that falls to pedagogues, is to support the child image in this approach, to make the necessary arrangement in the classroom and with the program for creating many ways of expression for children and to be sure that what is being done is appropriate with the environment and culture they are living in (Inan, 2012; 2-3).

According to Rinaldi (2003); children should be encouraged to express themselves and their experiences in different ways in RE approach. Reggio Emilia children gain the skill to express themselves at a high level by using many ways of symbolic expression. In order to achieve that, children work in an environment regulated for developing social, cognitive, lingual and symbolic structures generally accompanied by an adult (Rinaldi 2003).

According Aslan (2007), children encounter a wall that prevents them from improvement in the development period in the Reggio Emilia approach. This wall is formed of traditional educational methods and behavioral patterns, which are hard to comprehend for children but which are adopted by adults and rigid strict rules that, became old. For this reason, a child should be supported to learn new cultural values and roles within the society. After this support is provided and the help is ensured, the child must manage to overcome this wall formed of old value judgments which prevents his development. The essential objective in the Reggio Emilia

approach is to teach the child to overcome this wall and to help him to be an individual who is self-sufficient and who can deal with obstacles he encounters.

Temel and Dere (1999) state that one of the basic qualities of the Reggio Emilia approach is that it allows children to make new discoveries by presenting them concrete experiences. Children pass through the stages of studying, producing and testing their hypotheses, respectively. With the Reggio Emilia approach, children find the opportunity to express themselves in many different symbolic ways such as painting pictures, sculpturing and playing dramatic games. This point of view called as "the hundred languages of a child" by Reggio pedagogues, argues that children transform their concrete experiences to symbolic experiences. Children work with their peers about solving their problems and pedagogues help them during these works. Sometimes drawings or ideas are reviewed and corrected (Aslan, 2007). Some conditions are necessary in order to fulfill the purposes of the Reggio Emilia approach (Cited in Unsal, 2005 from Temel, 2005). These are:

- ✓ Negative effect of current social and cultural philosophy, which causes certain problems during the development of a child, should be prevented.
- ✓ Children should be allowed to use their capacities in a way to resist the pressure of adults and the effect of their own physical and social environment by means of observation, hearing, imagination, finding reasons, conceptualization and many other mental processes.
- ✓ Children should be given the freedom to express themselves and assess the world.
- ✓ Children should be given freedom and opportunities to develop their imagination and satisfy their curiosity during their learning period.
- ✓ It is necessary ensure that a child is active in order to be able to use his potential in order to think deep, comment and making analyses about objects and activities. It is important for children to participate in activities, make mistakes and change their mistakes later. This approach supports being active in problem solving. Teachers should direct and guide children during their activities. Reggio teachers direct children into finding appropriate solutions instead of providing solutions for problems. Many studies of teachers are determined by developmental specialists. Learning activities in Reggio Emilia schools are based on learning. Projects are developed in subjects that are related to each other.
- ✓ In the projects:
- ✓ Subjects are chosen according to interests and experience of children.
- ✓ Content of the project is determined by students.
- ✓ It is ensured of the project to be applied by small groups.
- ✓ Projects included works regarding mathematics, science, writing, music and social works.
- ✓ Documents for the projects are provided by teachers.

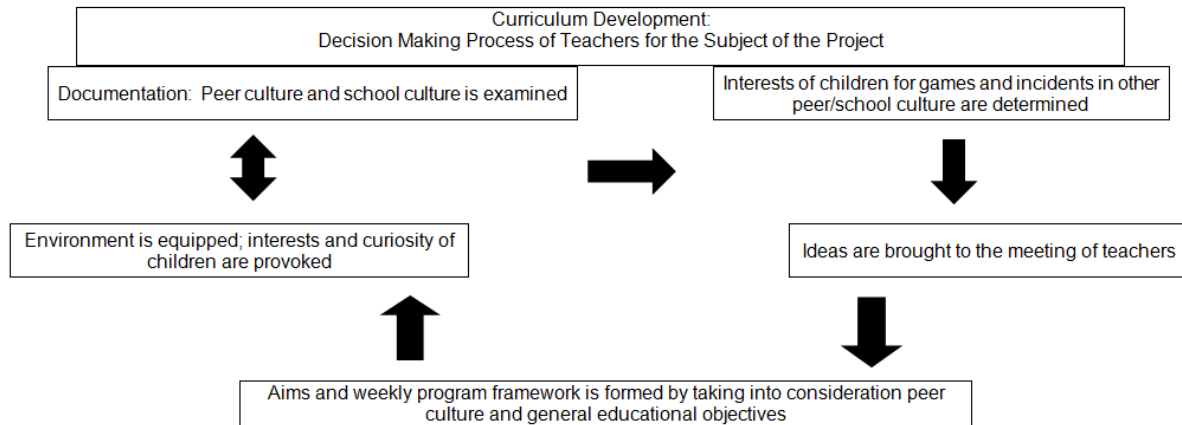
3. CURRICULUM and CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS in THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH

Founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, Loris Malaguzzi, reflects social constructivism in this approach under the effect of the opinions of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner and other researchers. Since Piaget focused only on babies and preschool age, Malaguzzi considers Piaget's opinions very limiting. Malaguzzi attributes a strong image to a child as a curious social creature full of intelligence since his birth. His "relation-based education" opinion expresses relations of every child with others, peers, his family, society and his environment. This strong child image changes in the systems to which it is included and becomes "the producer of culture, values and rights" (Rinaldi, 2001a). Teachers should support discoveries and researches of the children. A child should express his thoughts and emotions by using "100 languages" (Edwards 2002; 4).

Rinaldi (2003) defines RE curriculum as "contextual", that is to say, the curriculum is decided with dialogs between children, teachers and environment. Content can be chosen from among subjects related to the suggestions of students, suggestions of teachers, a natural incident or some news. Study subjects may be chosen from among the speeches of children, social incidents, family incidents and the interest areas of children (dinosaurs, shadow plays, puddles etc.). Team documents and project works are the most important components of the curriculum. Teachers work together to formulate hypotheses in projects, to provide necessary materials and to obtain possible support from family and society. It should be guaranteed that learning is a group activity rather than an individual activity measured with a test. Rinaldi, states that curriculum named *progettazione* in Reggio Emilia approach is based on project approach of curriculum and small learning (Inan, 2012). First, *emergent curriculum term*, which means naturally developing curriculum, was used in English for *progettazione* (Cited in Inan, 2012 from Rinaldi, 1993) while *projected curriculum* (Cited in Inan, 2012 from Rinaldi, 1998) term, which means predicted curriculum, was used later. The Reggio Emilia approach, which has a curriculum shaped according to the time, place and the result of the work to be conducted with active participation by everyone, suggests that children learn with short-term experiences or even momentary experiences. Malaguzzi (1993) also stated that there was no fully structured curriculum showing the things to be taught in Reggio Emilia schools. Instead of this, it is suggested to decide about subjects and things to be learned together with teachers and peers of children (Hewett, 2011).

Project is realized with searching for an element deeply within the real world. Teachers allow students to make observations during the project. The project is generally prepared by a group of students or by a whole classroom or a student sometimes. The real purpose of the project is to ensure that students find answers to questions asked by other students or teachers and to work to find such answers. Project ensured that the abilities of a child is realized and his conscious for initiatives and responsibility, making decisions and choices is improved

and that the child go after his interests and conduct researches (Cited in Aslan, 2007 from Imamoglu an Oz, 2002). According to Inan (2012), it is not right to say whether or not there is a curriculum in the Reggio Emilia approach. Every child in Reggio Emilia schools work as a researcher. They use their scientific process skills. Reggio Emilia curriculum structure contains experience and knowledge that teachers has for early childhood period and this knowledge used as a draft is shaped by directing relationships. A curriculum development process implemented in an American school affected by the Reggio Emilia approach was presented below (Inan, 2012):



Firstly, it is necessary to understand and examine the child understanding of adopted by Reggio Emilia in order to understand what kind of program understanding it has. For example, we can attribute each year having different curriculums to the fact that children change each year even though teachers and quality of places remain the same. Because every child has different kinds of needs and interests, teachers and pedagogues will prepare appropriate plans and general objectives by taking this quality of children into consideration.

Malaguzzi mentions Reggio Emilia Curriculum as a *curriculum from children* instead of a *curriculum for children* (Inan, 2012). This understanding is the most important quality that differs Reggio Emilia curriculum from other curriculums. According to a child, a curriculum means one that is prepared according to the wishes, needs and skills of children. Activities, during which children work as researchers and use their scientific process skills, are included to this curriculum prepared by getting inspiration from children.

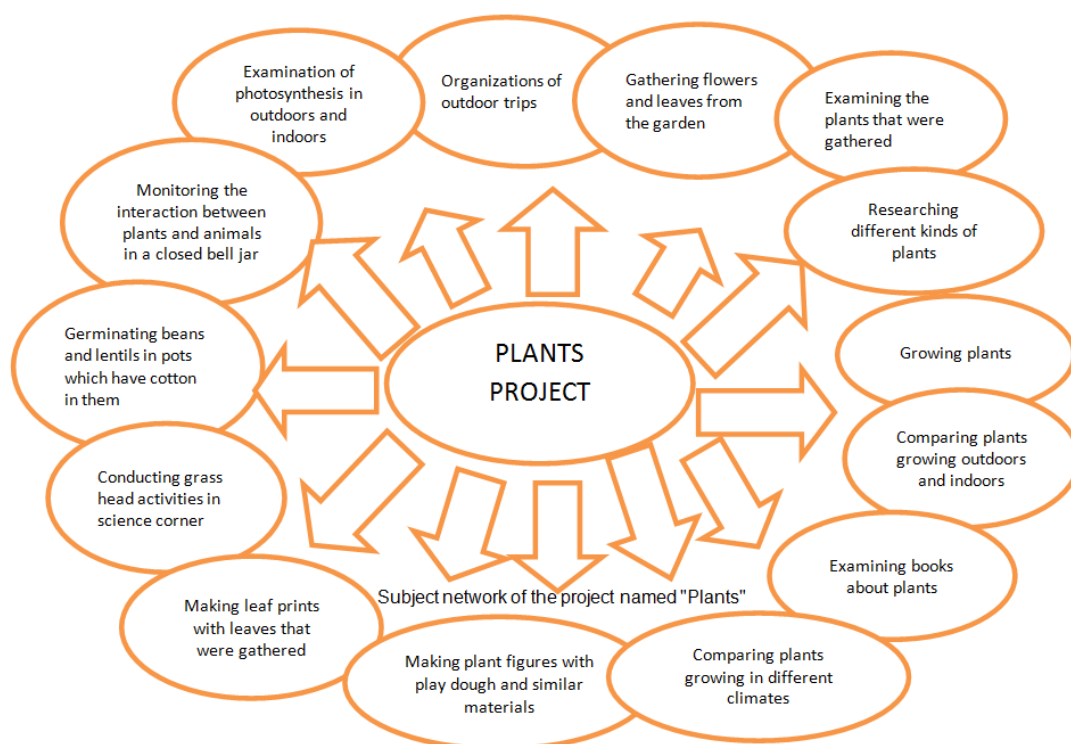
4. CHILDREN AND TEACHERS ON THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH

Every child has the right to have good care and education according to the Reggio Emilia approach. A child is an individual who develops theories and who has his own methods for obtaining data and developing hypotheses in this approach. A child is a being with a capacity to produce information himself and more than one source in mental, emotional and social terms (Unsal, 2005).

Basic opinion in RE approach is that a child has an image of a being that has rights instead of a being with needs. According to Malaguzzi, a child is a beautiful, strong, skillful, creative, curious being with an innate potential. His nature, his thoughts and what he does should be taken into consideration and respected. For this reason, it is underlined in the approach to listen to a child in the right manner. A child is considered as the active constructor of knowledge, a researcher and a social entity in RE approach (Hewett, 2001). Children are not considered as empty plates to be filled with knowledge in Reggio Emilia schools. They are considered to be ready to learn when the best and the most appropriate opportunities are presented. (Cited in Aslan, 2007 from Bennett, 2001). "Thinking is researching" idea of John Dewey corresponds to the image and role of children in RE schools. Children are natural researchers who make researches by asking about what they see, making guesses, making experiments and discoveries. Role of children in RE approach is realized during the activities regarding project subjects or during thorough works that one or more children conducted. Children have opportunities to discover, question, discuss, establish hypotheses and verify their thoughts by participating in project works (Hewett 2001; 96).

According to the Reggio Emilia approach, teachers are also learners and they provide an environment and opportunity for every child to act in a way that is sufficient to act himself and to structure knowledge. They consider themselves as "compasses" and set on the adventure of learning with children. Teachers consider themselves as participants and enjoy discovering with children during the learning process (Cited in Aslan, 2007 from Temel and Dere, 1999). Teachers should create venues in which there is an ample amount of opportunities to support development of children and to allow them solve problems. Cooperative works should be supported and records should be taken by watching the discussions in small groups. Also, classes do not belong to one teacher in Reggio approach. All the employees of a school make plans together. There is no hierarchy regarding tasks. Teachers pay attention on which point the interests of children focus also observe closely the ways in which students use the materials. These observations include not only the interest of children into materials but also his creativity level and the questions he asked to teachers (Cited in Aslan, 2007 from Bennett, 2001).

A sample project subject network named "plants" which can be used in Reggio Emilia schools is given below:



5. RESULTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Reggio Emilia is an alternative approach for educating children and generally it has the qualities of constructivist education generally. This approach, which aims for children to solve the problems he encounters himself, is also centered on children and family, society and teachers take part in this approach. It is necessary for a child to participate in activities himself and take part actively. Children growing up according to the Reggio Emilia approach become individuals with high self-confidence, improved personalities, improved production level who are acting in solidarity.

Curriculum development is done with the mutual interaction between objectives, content, teaching-learning process and assessment dimensions, which are all the elements of the curriculum. Basic principles of the Reggio Emilia approach can be used especially while interacting with students, teachers and environment in the content creation aspect of the curriculum development and project creation activities in teaching-learning process aspect of the curriculum.

Long-term in-service education programs about theoretical dimension and applications of RE approach should be organized for teachers. Teacher education curriculums should include RE approach and applications related to it before that. Thus, it may be easier for the teacher candidates who encountered RE approach before service to implement this approach during their service.

For the Ministry of Education to be able to use and spread the RE approach in schools and, it is necessary for the teachers to be supported with learning materials and resources prepared according to RE approach. It should be ensured that students reach raw data and rich materials which will allow them to solve problems they may encounter during life.

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