

# The Reggio Emilia approach

The Reggio Emilia educational philosophy derives from educational pedagogies and philosophies developed since the 1950s within early childhood settings in the town of Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy. The Reggio Emilia approach takes a constructivist and social-constructivist approach to teaching and learning, grounding curriculum in children's inquiries and projects. It focuses on the idea of the child as creative and intelligent, capable of exploring and discovering for themselves, with both the intention and the right to make meaning in many different ways.

## **The main features of the Reggio Emilia approach**

**Inquiry:** The Reggio Emilia approach focuses on wondering with children about what they experience, think and feel and on encouraging children to make sense of their world. Inquiry is therefore flexible and responsive to children's motivations, interests and contexts, and what is meaningful for children in their lives.

**Project-based:** Teachers in Reggio Emilia seek underlying or overarching ideas in children's play and inquiry as a basis for projects. Teachers are always prepared to ask children challenging questions. They encourage children to ask questions, form hypotheses and do research. Individual interests are developed into in-depth group experiences and projects. Children are invited to join projects and meetings in regard to co-researching specific learning interests. Teachers follow the children and make proposals or plan possibilities rather than designing predetermined plans. They hypothesise about what might take place in educational projects and formulate objectives that are flexible and can be adapted to children's interests and needs during the project process.

**Environment as the third teacher:** Teachers provide a well-planned environment with provocative materials as well as meaningful experiences in the world. This leads them to describe the environment as a 'third teacher'.

**Expressive experiences:** Teachers encourage children to make sense of experiences and ideas through '100 languages', which recognises both multiple knowledge systems and ways of understanding phenomena, as well as multiple ways of expressing and communicating ideas. Each language is thought to help children to think about a phenomena in a different light. For example, children might explore an interest in

giraffes through the language of art or clay, the language of biology, or the language of measurement.

**Collaboration, dialogue and exchange of ideas:** Children are encouraged to make explicit what they think and engage in interaction, discussion, and conflict (intellectual argument) in order to negotiate and build meaning with others. In this way children co-construct knowledge in relationship with other children and their teachers; they also are involved in co-constructing the culture (rules and meanings) of their early childhood setting, while teachers see themselves as observers, listeners, partners and provocateurs. Teachers build on the prior knowledge and beliefs of children by providing the communicative and practical skills as well as the concepts and knowledge systems children need to pursue activities related to their interests.

**Pedagogical documentation:** this is a form of recording children's actions and words in early childhood settings in order to listen to and come to better know the child, to develop new ways of relating to children, and to co-construct curricular experiences with children. Teachers use the process of documenting their practice and the children's responses to explore their own teaching, to inform professional dialogue and to generate questions and inquiry about the children and their learning. Documentation aims to make children's learning, skills, strategies, processes and understandings visible, foregrounding their learning processes for knowledge construction rather than the context and activities. It is shared with children and families to enable them to interpret, reflect upon, evaluate and co-construct the meaning of experiences.

**Research supporting co-construction:** Researchers suggest that, in order to best support children's learning and development, pedagogies should focus on listening, extending children's thoughts and knowledge, and co-constructing meanings together through processes of knowledge sharing and exchange<sup>ii</sup>, as in the Reggio Emilia approach. Open-ended questioning and sustained shared thinking, also a feature of the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, are associated with children's greater academic progress<sup>iii</sup>.

**Research supporting inquiry work:** Research indicates that children's learning involves gradual understanding characterised by corrected errors, revised misconceptions and expanded ideas<sup>iv</sup>, and that children learn about new information or new processes in the light of what they already understand and know<sup>v</sup>. This suggests a need to draw out and explore children's current knowledge<sup>vi</sup>, emergent understandings, ideas and working theories<sup>vii</sup> (the focus of Reggio Emilia's inquiry work with children) as the basis for

acquiring new knowledge<sup>viii</sup>. In-depth and deep knowledge of an interest is found to support children to learn in rich detail<sup>ix</sup>, and to lead to more effective neural connections than, for example, drill learning<sup>x</sup>. In addition, when children hold interest and knowledge in a particular topic they are found to be more likely to ask questions, take initiative in conversations, and discuss their learning<sup>xi</sup>, and can perform at a level far exceeding expectations<sup>xii</sup> such as working with abstract categories and classification schemes and structures.

**Research supporting pedagogical documentation:** Research suggests that Reggio Emilia's use of documentation to help children learn about and become aware of their processes for learning is important because when children understand the learning process, they can be more motivated to continue with learning activities. The use of documentation also enables greater understanding of and responsiveness to individual children's learning. A large body of research suggests that teachers' responsiveness to children's developmental level and characteristics is crucial to supporting their learning and development, and has a huge effect on the way that neural connections are wired.

## Further Readings

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## Endnotes

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