

The Reggio Emilia approach

ECE resources

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. This educational project was initiated in the aftermath of World War II and was intended to be progressive, democratic and liberating. The Reggio Emilia approach takes a constructivist and social-constructivist approach to teaching and learning, grounding curriculum in children's inquiries and projects. Like Te Whāriki, 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. This takes place in a context of rich relationships with other people and materials.

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. Children, families and communities are all involved in planning and evaluating projects.

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.

Empirical findings

There is little empirical research directly measuring the impact of the Reggio Emilia approach for children's learning, although some research shows that Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools in the United States are science-rich, and that the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia can lead to effective practices for early science education such as active engagement in science, science process skills and science content knowledge¹.

Several features of the Reggio Emilia approach align with [broad principles for supporting learning in early childhood](#) which are well substantiated by research.

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 exchange², as in the Reggio Emilia approach and also in Te Whāriki. Open-ended questioning and sustained shared thinking, also a feature of the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, are associated with children's greater academic progress³.

Research supporting inquiry work: Research indicates that children's learning involves gradual understanding characterised by corrected errors, revised misconceptions and expanded ideas⁴, and that children learn about new information or new processes in the light of what they already understand and know⁵. This suggests a need to draw out and explore children's current knowledge⁶, emergent understandings, ideas and working theories⁷ (the focus of Reggio Emilia's inquiry work with children, and also prominent in Te Whāriki) as the basis for acquiring new knowledge⁸. In-depth and deep knowledge of an interest is found to support children to learn in rich detail⁹, and to lead to more effective neural connections than, for example, drill learning¹⁰. 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 learning¹¹, and can perform at a level far exceeding expectations¹² 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.

How you might begin to explore this approach in your own teaching

While the Reggio Emilia approach is uniquely appropriate for its own context, it can offer teachers in New Zealand an opportunity to reflect upon, incorporate or strengthen pedagogical tools and practices such as inquiry, co-construction and pedagogical documentation that are known to be effective in early childhood education and that align well with Te Whāriki's focus on working theories, children's interests and narrative assessment.

To begin to incorporate the strengths of the Reggio Emilia approach in your own teaching, **focus on making your documentation and assessment practices more pedagogical**, that is, using documentation as a tool to help you learn about children and how they are learning, and about the effectiveness of teaching, rather than focusing on the end document (a learning story). You might then **offer experiences to groups of children** who have shown interest in a given topic (for example, by asking lots of questions), by inviting them to become part of a Learning Group. Explain what a Learning Group is, and what their participation would entail. For example, tell children a Learning Group is a group of children and teachers who come together because they have a shared interest in a topic, and because they want to develop their knowledge and understanding through research activity and discussion. The Learning Group would meet regularly and decide together what questions and theories they would like to explore and research. You might investigate the impact of small learning groups for discussion and research activity on children's question-asking or working theory development, or compare the learning and engagement that occurs in a small Learning Group meeting to that of a whole-group mat-time.

You might **enrich environments with the intentional use of materials** and [loose parts](#), and investigate the influence of particular materials on children's learning and the role of the teacher in framing children's use of materials. Can the use of materials help children extend their thinking, and in what ways? Discover if asking children to express ideas through different media is more effective at particular stages of their enquiry. Take your time and go slowly, especially for aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach such as identifying learning to be expanded and explored further through projects, so that you are not documenting too many experiences. This is likely to become unmanageable and lead to difficulties identifying meaningful and valuable learning.

Reflective questions

How can you actively encourage a culture of inquiry and research?

How can you support continuity and cohesion in children's inquiries? How can you encourage children to participate, collaborate with each other, and discuss learning and ideas?

How might you organise and connect spaces, materials and people to provoke expressive experiences for children?

How can children's art experiences sustain innovative and creative thinking and learning, or help children to articulate their thinking and theories in an area of interest?

How can documentation inspire new ways of learning?

Further reading

Gandini, L. (2005). *In the spirit of the studio: Learning from the atelier of Reggio Emilia*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Inan, H. Z., Trundle, K. C., & Kantor, R. (2010). Understanding natural sciences education in a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 47 (10), 1186-1208.

Turner, T., & Wilson, D. G. (2009). Reflections on documentation: A discussion with thought leaders from Reggio Emilia. *Theory into Practice*, 49(1), 5-13. doi: 10.1080/00405840903435493

Wharton, P., & Kinney, L. (2015). *Reggio Emilia encounters: Children and adults in collaboration*. London: David Fulton.

Endnotes

¹ Inan, H. Z., Trundle, K. C., & Kantor, R. (2010). Understanding natural sciences education in a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 47 (10), 1186-1208.

² Bateman, A. (2013). *Pedagogical intersubjectivity: Teaching and learning conversations between children and teachers*. Summary report. Wellington: Teaching and Learning Research Initiative.

³ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE] project: Technical paper 12: The final report: Effective preschool education*. London: Institute of Education

⁴ Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A. N., & Kuhl, P.K. (1999). *The scientist in the crib: Minds, brains, and how children learn*. New York, NY: William Morrow & Co.

⁵ Raban, B. (2001). Learning, progression, and development: Principles for pedagogy and curriculum. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 26(2), 31-35.

⁶ National Research Council (2000). *Eager to learn: Educating Our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/9745>.

⁷ National Research Council, 2000.

⁸ Raban, B. (2001). Learning, progression, and development: Principles for pedagogy and curriculum. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 26 (2), 31-35.

^{9,10} Centre for Educational Research and Innovation: Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development. (2007). *Understanding the brain: The birth of a learning science*. Author.

¹¹ Carr, M. (2011). Young children reflecting on their learning: Teacher's conversation strategies. *Early Years*, 31(3), 257-70. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2011.613805

¹² National Research Council, 2000.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.