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Abstract

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education was developed in the city of Reggio Emilia after the Second World War under the leadership of Loris Malaguzzi. Today, Reggio Emilia schools stand as exemplars for the development of young children's creativity. This paper provides an overview of the Reggio Emilia approach and examines how it aligns with current research findings related to the development of creativity in young children.

Keywords: Creativity, Early childhood education, Reggio Emilia

Introduction

The city of Reggio Emilia, located in the northern region of Italy, prides itself as a diverse city with a strong sense of community that cares for the emotional wellbeing and education of young children. The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, established after the Second World War by a group of passionate parents and educators, emphasizes the importance of the learning relationships between the child, the teacher, the environment, and the community (Hewett, 2001). Over the past thirty years, the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy has attracted early childhood educators from all over the world to see its "main attraction: schools in which the minds, bodies, and spirits of young children are treated with utmost seriousness and respect" (Project Zero, 2001, p. 25). There is much to be gleaned from the work of Reggio Emilia schools in terms of how they educate young children and, more importantly, how this educational approach enhances children's creativity and critical thinking skills. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the philosophy, history, curriculum, and pedagogy of the Reggio Emilia approach and examine how it relates to current research findings on creativity.

Creativity

Wright explains creativity as involving the act of using information or common ideas in original or unique ways (as cited in Kemple & Nissenberg, 2000). "Creativity is a way of thinking or acting or making something that is original for the individual and valued by that person or others" (Mayesky, 1998, p. 4). Widely regarded aspects of creativity include imagination, curiosity, risk-taking, wonderment, flexibility, experimentation, breaking of boundaries, and openness to new perspectives (Prentice, 2000).

Environments that foster creativity are typically learning-enriched and promote independence and respect for children (Kemple & Nissenberg, 2000). Families that promote freedom of exploration and allow children long periods of uninterrupted play to make mistakes and take risks have been shown to support more creative development than rushed lifestyles with structured schedules (Kim, 2011).

Similarly, schools that provide children with uninterrupted periods of play and work in order for children to concentrate and make individual choices about activities that match their interests, have been shown to promote children's creativity and critical thinking skills (Kim, 2011; Roemer, 2012). Additionally, with an adult's encouragement, these long periods of uninterrupted time encourage problem-finding skills which are necessary skills for generating new ideas (Kim, 2011). Collaboration and asking open-ended questions have also been shown to enhance the creative process (Cheung & Leung, 2013).

Reggio Emilia
Historical Foundations

After the Second World War, the city of Reggio Emilia re-invented itself as a civic community. "The city, from that moment on,

founded itself on the participation of the people, on the sense of the community, on the sense of dependency from one to another" (Delrio, 2012). Parents and educators worked together to build municipal pre-schools and early childhood centers under the visionary leadership of Loris Malaguzzi, a teacher himself. In 1961 he opened the Robinson school, the first municipal school in Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi, regarded as the founder of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, continued to open and lead the centers until his death in 1994 (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). Today, the municipality of the city of Reggio Emilia operates and finances twenty-two schools for children ages three to six, and thirteen infant toddler centers for children ages zero to three. Parents, to this day, play an essential role in their children's education (Hewitt, 2001). Reggio Emilia currently spends 41% of its educational resources on early childhood education, while the rest of Italy spends only 9%. The municipality believes that investing in early childhood education yields high economic returns (Delrio, 2012).

Social, Philosophical, and Psychological Foundations

One of the fundamental beliefs in Reggio Emilia is respect for the child, or what Malaguzzi called "the image of the child," which is a socially constructed and shared understanding of the child as having "rights rather than simply needs. Influenced by this belief, the child is beheld as beautiful, powerful, competent, creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires" (Hewett, 2001, p.96). This respect for the child as a curious being is one of the most important elements that promotes a child's creativity (Prentice, 2000; Roemer, 2012). The social constructivist approach of Reggio Emilia education is composed of a combination of educational theories that support and expand on Malaguzzi's conviction of the image of the child (Hewitt, 2001). It draws heavily on the philosophies of Piaget (1973), Dewey (1966), Vygostky (1978), and others. Malaguzzi used these philosophies and expanded on them to create his vision of education, which is an education based on relationships. "It focuses on each child in relation to others and seeks to activate and support children's reciprocal relationships with other children, family, teachers, society, and the environment" (Edwards, 2002, p.10).

Curriculum and Pedagogy

As a result of Reggio Emilia's historical foundations, which are built upon collaboration between parents, educators, and the community, curriculum is regarded as "a communal activity and as a sharing of culture through joint exploration between children and adults who together open topics to speculation and discussion" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p.8). Learning is a process that occurs individually and through group construction, which takes its shape through the relationships amongst the group members, the adults, and the interactions with the environment. Time and communication, particularly "active listening between adults, children, and the environment is the premise and context of every educational relationship" (Infant-toddler centers and preschools, 2010, p.11). Communication is essential to the construction and verification of knowledge. Learning takes place through research and the group sharing of ideas, which allows for the facilitation of creativity and curiosity (Piaget, 1981). Vygotsky (1990) clarified that "A child needs meaningful interactions and collaborations to be creative" (as cited in Kim, 2012, p.293).

Curriculum

Through the lens of social constructivism, knowledge in the Reggio Emilia approach is perceived as dynamic; and instead of the existence of one truth, there are multiple truths or multiple forms of knowing (Hewitt, 2001). Similarly, there are multiple forms of expressing:

> Children grow in competence to symbolically represent ideas and feelings through any of their "hundred languages" (expressive, communicative, and cognitive)—words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, music, to name a few—that they systemically explore and combine. (Edwards, 2002, p. 10)

Researchers view creativity as multifaceted—expressed through a variety of forms of communication and expression, and applied in a variety of contexts (Gardner, 1993). To allow for such forms of expressions in Reggio Emilia classrooms, teachers do not follow a prescribed curriculum or a set of standards indicating what is to be learned (Hewitt, 2001). According to Malaguzzi (1993), "these [standards] would push our schools

towards teaching without learning" (p.8). The curriculum has "purposive progression but no scope and sequence" (Edwards, 2002, p. 11). Creating a meaningful and emotional relationship with the subject matter is emphasized over spending hours developing a certain academic skill. (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). Instead of an early push to read, teachers foster emergent literacy, which naturally evolves when children are in a literacy rich environment that encourages them to record and communicate their ideas with others (Barron, 2000; Edwards, 2002). This kind of approach, which is not so focused on academics and standardization, provides opportunities for teachers and students to think flexibly, creatively, and critically (Kim, 2011). The collaborative and negotiated process of teaching and learning through long-term open-ended projects takes place in carefully designed environments that offer "complexity and beauty as well as a sense of well being" (Edwards, 2002, p.11). Providing psychologically safe environments that allow children to explore, experiment, and make mistakes tends to advance children's creativity, as opposed to environments that are structured with a strong focus on academics, which can lead to anxiety, pressure, and ultimately, the stifling of creativity (Kemple & Nissenburg, 2000).

The Child as a Learner

In Reggio Emilia, each child is an active participant in his or her own learning and growth. Children are protagonists – or, as defined by Malaguzzi, "authors of their own learning" (Malaguzzi, 1993, p.20). For creativity to thrive, it is essential for the learner to be actively engaged in the learning process (Prentice, 2000). In Reggio Emilia, children are given opportunities to engage in the natural process of in-depth research and discovery as they undertake projects of their choice (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p.247). Children question, hypothesize, predict, experiment, reflect on their discoveries, and revisit their projects to "refine and clarify their understandings thereby expanding the richness of their thinking" (Hewett, 2001, p.96). Inquiry and reflection are important creativity skills (Prentice, 2000). According to Piaget, reflection is essential to creativity because new ideas stem from "mental actions, not external objects" (Kim, 2011, p.293).

The Role of the Teacher

Malaguzzi described the learning process between children and adults as a game of ping-pong. Teachers are involved in the learning process and take on the role of collaborators and co-learners (Hewitt, 2001). Reggio Emilia teachers practice negotiated learning. "In negotiated learning, the teachers seek to uncover the children's beliefs, assumptions, or theories about the way the physical or social world works" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p.247) through dialogue and discussion. Teachers tend to encourage rather than suppress differences of opinions and viewpoints. This intellectual conflict is understood as a tool for growth and a way to advance higher level thinking for both children and teachers (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Hewitt, 2001). The teachers do not control the children's learning; instead, they respect their discoveries by being active participants. They act as facilitators and guides, promoting the children's discovery by gently provoking and probing (Hewitt, 2001). At the same time, they never answer the children's questions, as they believe that answering the questions brings the research process to a halt. "Because when they ask 'why?' they are not simply asking for the answers from you (the teacher). They are requesting to find a collection of possible answers" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p.239). These open-ended questions proposed by both the children and teachers create the tension that fuels the research (Tedeschi, 2012). Involving children in the process of asking open-ended questions, finding problems, engaging in intellectual conflicts, and moving beyond prescribed procedures and preconceived ideas provides opportunities for creativity to flourish (Prentice, 2000).

Like the children, teachers take on the role of researchers by documenting and assessing children's work through careful observation and listening. By collecting and analyzing the data, they are able to determine critical information regarding the children's learning, development, and interests in order to create activities and work that match those interests. The data typically include transcribed audio recordings of conversations and dialogues, videos of children working and collaborating, and photographs of children's artwork in various stages of completion (Hewitt, 2001). Teachers work together along with a teacher specialized in visual arts to analyze and organize the data in a meticulous way to be displayed in the school and to make learning visible to the children and their parents (Edwards, 2002). Rinaldi

explains that making the documentation accessible and the learning visible to the children can "help you to understand and change your identity; it can invite you to reflect on your values" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p.236). Rinaldi furthers this point by arguing that the point of view of others confirms or changes one's own point of view. This helps children recognize that what they say and do is important—that it is valued, shared, understood, and respected (as cited in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman). This parallels Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) view of creativity which states that creativity takes place in a societal context that involves not only the person with the original idea but also the experts within that culture who recognize and validate the novel idea.

An example of a Reggio Emilia project is the story of the Un-composed Chairs. After a group discussion about sitting at the dinner table, which began when a child expressed discomfort about sitting patiently at the table, the class visited one of their favorite pizza restaurants in the city of Reggio Emilia and brought back a chair to study. They drew self-portraits of the many possible ways one can sit in a chair and experimented with the idea: What does it feel like to be composed or un-composed while sitting in a chair? The teachers documented the children's work and extensive dialogues to study the amount of research and change that took place over a period of a month and to make the thinking process visible. When the class took the chair back to the restaurant, they brought along with them a detailed poster of their work, representing their multiple perspectives, which the restaurant owner posted outside the door (Birtani, 2012). The product of their work is not as valuable as the creative process and collective growth that took place to produce the poster (Project Zero, 2001). Reggio Emilia educators believe in open-endedness. Projects are never finished. Instead, they are transformed into different versions as they are studied from different perspectives. This kind of open and flexible curriculum that stems out of the interests and passions of the children invites independence and is the foundation of entrepreneurship and creativity (Zhao, 2012).

School Structure and Classrooms

One of the reasons for the Reggio Emilia schools' success in promoting children's creativity is that all the essential elements required to enhance creativity are embedded in the school culture and the parent community. Because of the strong relationship between teachers and parents, which was traditionally established when the schools were first conceived, the mission of the schools is to maintain this relationship through collaboration and active communication with parents (Tedeschi, 2012). Wright (1987) has "argued that unless early childhood programs consider and include the family as an important influence on creative development, the long-term effects of teacher training and creativity programs in schools is dubious" (as cited in Kemple & Nissenberg, 2000, p. 69).

The schools are designed to reflect the architecture of the city: each school houses a central piazza, or a gathering area, that leads into the classrooms, where children meet and socialize before transitioning to their respective classrooms. The piazza is also a meeting place for group discussions and imaginative play. Imaginative play in the Reggio Emilia schools is valued as a form of expression (Project Zero, 2010). Children are allowed long uninterrupted periods of play time to engage in the process of play and imagination, which are precursors to the development of creativity (Prentice, 2000).

The *atelier* or art studio is at the heart of every school, and was conceived as a laboratory for the development of the expressive potential and creativity of the adults and children. In the 1980s, Loris Malaguzzi developed the novel idea of combining art and pedagogy. "He said, 'Let's make an experiment and see what happens. We will mix one drop of art and one drop of pedagogy.' And that's how the *atelier* started (A. Gambetti, personal communication, April 20, 2012). According to Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2012), the *atelierista* (the artist) who is in charge of the *atelier* and is responsible for maintaining the aesthetics of the school typically holds an art degree and works with the teachers who hold degrees in early childhood education. The idea is that the *atelierista* and the teachers learn from their experiences together. The classrooms are composed of two teachers and twenty-five children and each school has a main *atelierista*. In addition to the large *atelier*, each classroom has a mini *atelier*. Children work in the smaller *atelier* or visit the larger one depending on their projects or needs. The kitchen, which is central to every school, is called the *atelier* of taste. All adults, including the chefs are active participants with

shared responsibilities for the education of children. Children's sense of ownership of the school and their learning is evident as they freely move in and out of the classrooms throughout the day to visit the *piazza*, the cooks in the kitchen, or the large *atelier*. A need to control the young children's whereabouts is non-existent (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). Environments that do not overprotect or engage in excessive control over children's actions and behaviors allow children the freedom to explore, experiment, and develop their creative imagination (Kemple & Nessenburg, 2001).

According to Hewitt (2001), the children remain in the same classrooms with the same teachers over a three-year cycle. This creates continuity and helps build their comfort level and confidence, as it reduces the number of transitions. It also strengthens the connections between teachers and parents as they learn from each other. All staff members meet once a week to share ideas and practice in in-service training. Classroom teachers and the atelierista meet more frequently to share children's daily progress. Additionally, the teachers' roles include active collaboration with the parents and the community. "Collaboration, from all angles, is a cornerstone of the Reggio Emilia approach" (Hewitt, 2001, p.97). Collaboration and team-building skills are both enhancers of creativity (Kim, 2011).

Implications for Early Childhood Educators

Although the Reggio Emilia approach is conducive to the development of creativity, it cannot be viewed without skepticism. Children in Reggio Emilia are not required by law to have formal education until the age of six or first grade (Delrio, 2012). Therefore, early childhood centers are free to exercise great flexibility in teaching and learning, as they are not required or pressured to maintain school readiness for children moving up to first grade, as is the case in the United States. Additionally, the municipality and the Italian government do not impose federal or state mandates at the early childhood level; nor do they require schools to follow certain academic standards. There are only minimal guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice, developed by the municipality, to ensure the safety of children (Infant-toddler centers and preschools, 2010).

Educators in Reggio Emilia believe that their approach should not be viewed as a model or a recipe for an early childhood education, as it was designed specifically for the community and culture of the city of Reggio (Edwards, 2002). However, the approach provides inspirational ideas that can be incorporated in any early childhood setting to promote children's creativity:
• Dialoguing with children through open-ended and probing questions that fuel the research process
• Engaging children in large group discussions and incorporating activities that match their interests
• Designing the classroom environment to foster more collaborative work between children
• Collaborating actively with parents and the community and educating them about creativity and its importance at the early childhood level
• Establishing teachers as researchers, reflective practitioners, and co-learners
• Providing large blocks of unstructured work and play for children to experiment, engage in open-ended projects, reflect, develop their imagination, and take risks

Conclusion

As documented in this paper, the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education is an exemplar for the development of young children's creativity, as it parallels current theoretical research. The approach facilitates the development of young children's creativity by encouraging open-ended projects, an emergent curriculum, dialogue between teachers and children, imaginative play, reflection, and intellectual risk taking. Reggio Emilia's respect and celebration of children's natural curiosities and wonderment is an inspiration to early childhood educators and administrators.

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