

Session: The Art and Design of Reggio Emilia Classrooms
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The Art and Design of the Reggio Emilia Approach

Since World War II the town of Reggio Emilia, Italy has employed the *hundred languages of children* and positioned art and design as a mainstay to their early childhood educational practices. This child-centered form of curriculum is practiced around the globe and honors the individuality for each child (Edwards, C., Gandini, 2011). Here students are encouraged to explore their world and express their findings through art and discovery. I recently visited Italy to research this method of education and I discovered that there was a foundational presence of art and design throughout the Reggio Emilia Approach.

The Design of the Facilities:

Every room is equipped with an atelier or a mini art room because art is the central focus of every stage of development in Reggio. Besides basic art supplies, the classrooms contain mostly recycled, and natural elements. Very little supplies are store bought such as markers or toys. The pedagogical design of the Reggio Approach is for children to imagine the possibilities of their world and learn through their experiences. This extends to the outdoor areas as well. There are no manufactured playgrounds. Nature is their playground for adventure and imagination play. However, one essential item that is purchased is a light table for the children to investigate light, shadow, and transparency of various objects.

The Pedagogista:

The pedagogista maintains the pedagogy of the lessons, curriculum planning, and how the school is directed. The Pedagogista designs the schedule for the day leaving time for exploration. For example, first thing in the morning all age levels gather in the piazza for morning assembly. They sing songs and discuss what will happen throughout the day. Afterward the students proceed to different activities. During this time “curiosities are taken into consideration.” When the children express different interests then those interests are nurtured and curriculum planning is changed. The pedagogista also works closely with the art teacher or atelierista concentrating on student curiosities.

The Atelierista:

The art teacher is the central teacher leader of the school, the curriculum, and the daily routine of the students. The arts are incorporated in curriculum planning, daily pedagogy, and project based assessment. One atelierista explained to me, “Art is fundamental in our school. Art is a natural form of communication. Students at these age use art to make sense of their world.” In order for learning to take place, communication and imagination are necessary (Vygotsky, 1978). Besides art, another responsibility of the atelierista is to document the learning process.

Documentation as Assessment:

In the Reggio schools documentation (photographing the students at play, learning and their artwork) is the main form of assessment. Throughout the day, as the students explore various learning stations such as examining leaves on a light table, designing bicycles from recycled material, or even the unique properties of paper. These images are exhibited on large panels, in daily diaries and as a pictorial evidence of students' day including meals, art making, and play. For the parents these documents demonstrate what their children did during the day, and reveal their progression throughout the year. The documentations are also displayed at child level so the children can revisit what they did as well. One atelierista stated, "They use the camera to capture movement and observe." And added, "This record keeping takes a large portion of the afternoon, however digital technology makes this process is much easier than before." An advantage to documenting the process is that it put emphasis on the "doing," "making," or "learning" and not just the end product. It is a very divergent way to view assessment rather than a single convergent method like test taking.

The Attention to Detail:

The students are taught to take their time and observe the details of everyday objects. On the day I visited one of these remarkable schools, on one table a head of lettuce lay open faced cut in half to reveal the various colors ranging from a deep green to a yellow green to a mint hue. The students (age 3-4) were brought to this table to examine the severed lettuce, then given paper, a brush, and fifteen shades of green paint. These young children observed and studied with the confidence of a master, they created magnificent replications of the chopped vegetable. What I anticipated would take 3-5 minutes for children of this age, took them approximately 20-25 minutes. The students conversed about what they saw and even shared techniques. There was verbal and artistic communication that could be compared to professional adult artists.

The art and design of the Reggio Emilia, Italy schools are unique, however the most noteworthy quality of this instructional method is the power it gives children to learn through the exploration of their world through art.

References

- Edwards, C., Gandini, L. (2011). *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Experience in Transformation*. Oxford, England: Praeger
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.