

Fundamentals of the Reggio Approach

In the quest for models of quality educational programs, American educators have discovered the schools in Reggio Emilia. These innovative programs, whose name is taken from the town in Italy where the approach was conceived, encompass and implement theoretical contributions of seminal thinkers including, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. Collaboration among children, teachers, parents, and the community is highly valued and the centers are open to all families regardless of income and supported by the town.

This model was conceived after World War II when the women of Reggio wanted to build a school, literally from the rubble of the devastated town. The parents and children gathered stones and sand from the river, sold scrap from the tanks, and built Reggio Emilia's first school for young children after the war. The curriculum is based on close observation and documentation of the children's ideas by the teacher who co-constructs knowledge with the children. Their ideology expanded and deepened and special roles are given to the atelierista (helps the children express ideas) and the pedagogista (the teacher and connector of the teachers). Parents continue to be engaged as partners in their child's learning. The environment is used as a valuable source of learning both to inspire, reflect and to promote the work of the children, which is done in small groups.

Growing Place teachers have been studying and implementing some of the Reggio Approach methods. The following are some of the ideals and methods that we have incorporated into the Growing Place philosophy:

The child as the protagonist. Children are strong, rich and capable. All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, negotiating with everything their environment brings to them. Children, teachers and parents are considered the three central protagonists in the education process.

The child as a collaborator. Education has to focus on each child in relation to other children, the family, the teachers, and the community rather than on each child in isolation. There is an emphasis on work in small groups. This practice is based on the social constructivist model that supports the idea that we form ourselves through our interaction with peers, adults, things in the world and symbols.

The child as a communicator. This approach fosters children's intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation, including words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, and music, which leads children to surprising levels of communication, symbolic skills and creativity. In this way, they make their thinking visible through their many natural "languages."

The environment as a third teacher. The design and use of the space encourage encounters, communication, and relationships. There is an underlying order and beauty in the design and organization of all the space in a school and the equipment and materials within it.

The teacher as partner, nurturer, and guide. Teachers facilitate children's exploration of themes, work on short and long term projects, and guide experiences of joint, open ended discovery and problem solving. To know how to plan and proceed with their work, teachers listen and closely observe children closely. Teachers ask questions, discover children's ideas, hypotheses, and theories: and provide occasions for discovery and learning.

The documentation as communication. Careful consideration and attention are given to the presentation of the children and adults who work with them. The documentation serves many purposes. It makes parents aware of their children's experiences. It allows teachers to better understand children, to evaluate their own work, and to exchange ideas with other educators. Documentation also shows children that their work is valued.

The parent as partner. Parent participation is considered and essential and takes many forms. Parents play an active part in their children's learning experience and help ensure the welfare of all the children in the school. The ideas and skills that the families bring to the school and, even more important, the exchange of idea, between parents and teachers, favor the development of a new way of educating, which helps teachers to view the participation of families not as a threat but as an intrinsic element of collegiality and as the integration of different wisdom's.

Excerpt taken from: Louise Boyd Cadwell: "Bringing Reggio Emilia Home:"