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Kelsey Robson, Lakehead University

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Review of the Literature on the Reggio Emilia Approach to Education with a Focus on the Principle of the Environment as the Third Teacher

Kelsey Robson

Lakehead University

Abstract

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This review of literature investigates the Reggio Emilia approach to education with a focus on the principle of the environment as the third teacher. A brief history of the Reggio Emilia approach and an explanation of its 12 guiding principles (collaboration, the image of the child, environment as a third teacher, relationships, transparency, documentation, pedagogical documentation, provocation, progettazione, one hundred languages of children, respect, and reciprocity) are explored. The review then dives deeper into the principle of the environment as the third teacher. Eight environment principles (aesthetics, active learning, collaboration, transparency, bringing the outdoors in, flexibility, relationship, and reciprocity) that need to be addressed when creating an environment that acts as the third teacher are examined. When creating an environment that acts as a third teacher one must rely on the support of each of the principles as a whole, not individually.

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T he early years of life are when the development and education of a child occur the fastest (Arseven, 2014). The experiences a child has early in life have an immense impact on their lifelong development (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006). More specifically, a stimulating learning environment leads to higher levels of thoughtful learning experiences for children which in turn better prepares them for adulthood (Steglin, 2005). Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) explain that, "childhood is often the first place where we begin to see and use the environment imaginatively [and where] we can begin to notice how our surroundings can take on a life of their own that contributes to children's learning" (p. 40). Makin (2003) defines the term "environment" in early education settings as a combination of conditions and influences on learning, including "both the physical environment (layout, range of resources, access and use) and the psychosocial environment (interactions between staff and children, among peers, and between the setting and its wider context of homes and communities)" (p. 327).

It is well documented that a high quality, positive environment successfully supports students' learning and their holistic development (Hewes, 2006; Makin, 2003; Shipley, 2008; Sylva et al., 2006). Shenk (2010) supports the idea of high quality learning environments and explains, "children develop only as the environment demands development" (p. 35). When preparing the school environment, Rinaldi (2001) stresses that it cannot be copied, only created, as it needs to reflect the children, families, educators, and community encompassing the school. She believes that the learning environment should become more than just a space – it should become a part of life, which does not substitute family but creates a new place for culture. It is believed that the physical characteristics of an educational environment reflect the educator's philosophical beliefs about how children are regarded and the value put on the process of teaching and learning (Makin, 2003; New, 1998). The environment is so entwined in a child's development that it is presumed that "the metamorphosis of childhood can be understood as a dynamic dance between children and their environments" (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006, p. 20).

Reggio Emilia

The Reggio Emilia approach to education supports the importance of the learning environment and describes it as the "third teacher" in the classroom alongside the teacher and children (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Reggio Emilia school settings are known for their rich environments that foster student learning because they are both aesthetically and intellectually stimulating while respecting the rights, interests, and need of the individuals who use the space (New, 1998). To create a learning space that acts as a third teacher, there needs to be invitations for learning that do not require teacher intervention (Fraser, 2012). "A classroom that is functioning successfully as a third teacher will respond to the children's interests, provide opportunities for children to make their thinking visible and then foster further learning and engagement" (Fraser, 2012, p. 67). Educators using the Reggio approach can spark their students' interest in learning by introducing "provocations" meant to excite students and spark discussion (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Some examples of provocations could be: bringing in realistic objects for children to use, positioning small mirrors around the classroom, or placing easels close to windows for natural sunlight and inspiration from the outdoors (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007).

The Reggio learning environment is unique in how the space is co-created by both the students and the educators in the classroom. This collaborative relationship consists of

reciprocal exchanges between the children and adults about appropriate adjustments that can be made to ensure optimal growth and learning within the classroom setting (Hewett, 2001). A key Reggio Emilia founder, Loris Malaguzzi, compares the relationship between the teacher and the children to a game of ping-pong, as both of the players need to make contributions to allow for optimal growth and learning; otherwise, a single player would be unable to participate in the game (Gandini, 2011b). Respecting the children who make up the learning environment is essential because when they feel safe in their learning community they are more likely to take risks and extend their learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012).

In the past decade, the Reggio Emilia approach to learning has significantly influenced the field of early childhood education with its holistic approach to the education of young children (Wexler, 2004). The first Reggio Emilia school was built in Italy after World War II in 1945-1946 (Fraser, 2012). The town of Reggio Emilia had been devastated during the war and a group of women came together to create new schools for their children where they could partake in quality learning experiences (Fraser, 2012). At that time, Malaguzzi, a young teacher, discovered what the women of Reggio Emilia were trying to do and offered to help them with aspirations of a new, stimulating school for their children (Fraser, 2012). Malaguzzi related a story to Gandini (2011b) of a group of parents who came together to build the Reggio schools and how they sold abandoned tanks, trucks, and horses left by the Germans after the war to help raise money for their children's education. Malaguzzi became an influential figure in Reggio Emilia schools and helped develop an outstanding philosophy of education that has continued to evolve over the years (Fraser, 2012).

Guiding Principles

Fraser (2012) outlines 12 guiding principles of the Reggio Emilia approach to learning: collaboration, the image of the child, environment as a third teacher, relationships, transparency, documentation, pedagogical documentation, provocation, progettazione (the name for curriculum in Reggio Emilia), one hundred languages of children, respect, and reciprocity. Since the beginning of Reggio Emilia, classrooms have been set up to support highly collaborative partnerships among parents, educators, and children (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011). Collaboration is achieved by having the teachers, students, families, and community work together at every level of education (Fraser, 2012). To ensure collaboration when working with children with special needs in the Reggio approach, a "Declaration of Intent" is jointly composed after a long period of observation and documentation of the child that is a "written agreement among the school, parents, and health service team to ensure collaboration" (Soncini, 2011, p. 194). According to Edwards, Gandini, and Nimmo (1994), using a collaborative approach to structuring children's learning experiences provides an alternative view of the image of the child.

The image of the child as capable, powerful, and resourceful is essential to the Reggio approach because children are seen as competent and capable of highly complex ideas (Wexler, 2004). Their image is deeply rooted in the culture, society, and family values of the people involved in the program (Fraser, 2012). Fyfe (2011) explains that a strong image of the child in Reggio is someone whose ideas are worth listening to, and whose comments are intelligent efforts to make sense of the world. In order to achieve this, teachers need to develop a pedagogy of listening, which requires them to slow down and listen to the children's ideas, opinions, and comments (Fyfe, 2011). Edwards (2011) defines the learning child as "powerful, active, competent *protagonists* of their own growth" (p. 180) who deserve the right to be listened to.

Each child is unique and seeks to explore their identity and make their voice heard, and it is the role of the teacher to aid in this process (Edwards, 2011).

The environment in the Reggio approach is seen as the third educator in the classroom, next to the teacher and children, and is thoughtfully arranged to spark children's interests through intentional provocations (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Gandini (2011a) describes the environment as a space that teaches and needs to be flexible and undergo frequent modification to remain up-to-date and responsive to the children's needs. In the words of Malaguzzi (as cited in Gandini, 2011a):

> We value space because of its power to organize and promote pleasant relationships among people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective, and cognitive learning. All of this contributes to a sense of well-being and security in children. We also think it has been said that the space has to be a sort of aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it. (p. 339)

In conversation with Gandini (2011b), Malaguzzi explains relationships as a "dynamic conjunction of forces and elements interacting toward a common purpose" (p. 45). There are three important relationships in the Reggio approach to learning and they include: physical relationships with the classroom, social relationships between the people in the environment, and intellectual relationships (Fraser, 2012). Relationships are the primary connecting dimension of the Reggio approach and it is the responsibility of the educator to set up the learning environment to initiate face-to-face interactions (Gandini, 2011b). These relationships can be enhanced by initiating small group activities of two to four children to promote conversation, as well as by having teachers respond to the children by asking questions or modifying the intensity of their interactions to help build their relationships (Gandini, 2011b).

Transparency is used as a guiding principle because of the vast amount of transparent materials used in the learning space such as mirrors, windows, and glass containers that catch and reflect light throughout the classroom (Fraser, 2012). Metaphorically, transparency can be used to explain the openness of the Reggio approach to ideas and theories from other parts of the world (Fraser, 2012). In terms of documentation, transparency can be used metaphorically to explain the availability of information for parents and visitors when they visit the center. Children's work and information about the center is made available for the visitors and parents by being posted on the walls in the entranceway as well as on the walls of the learning spaces (Fraser, 2012).

Forman and Fyfe (2011) describe documentation as "any record of performance that contains sufficient detail to help others understand the behavior recorded" (p. 250). Documentation is more than the finished product from a child. For instance, a drawing is all about the performance during the exercise as well as the documenter's interpretation of that performance (Forman & Fyfe, 2011). Documentation provides "a verbal and visual trace of the children's experiences and work" (Fraser, 2012, p. 9). An example of this type of documentation could be a panel of photographs with text explaining the learning process displayed publically in the classroom (Forman & Fyfe, 2011). This type of documentation is described in the Reggio approach as pedagogical documentation and can be defined as "a process for making pedagogical (or other) work visible and subject to dialogue, interpretation, contestation, and transformation" (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 225). Pedagogical documentation is achieved by having

teachers examine their work from multiple perspectives and becoming researchers of their own teaching methods (Fraser, 2012).

Provocations are used in the Reggio approach to surprise children and spark discussion (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007) and can be brainstormed by the educators after listening closely to students' interactions and interests (Fraser, 2012). Turner and Wilson (2009) explain that provocations can take many forms such as questions, variations on experiences, or the introduction of new materials, and can come from both the teacher and the children. "A provocation refers to the moment when teachers introduce a new element, carefully chosen to entice children into further inquiry" (Turner & Wilson, 2009, p. 12). Provocations are an essential element in a Reggio Emilia learning environment and enhance student learning by sparking their natural curiosity to learn.

Progettazione, the name for curriculum in Reggio Emilia (Arseven, 2014), is a flexible approach to learning that encourages further investigation of ideas through the collaboration of the students, educators, and environment (Fraser, 2012). The Reggio Emilia approach to education does not have a specific curriculum to follow but instead the curriculum emerges naturally through teacher and student interactions as well as interactions with the environment (Arseven, 2014). One way Forman and Fyfe (2011) describe curriculum is child-originated and teacher-framed rather than child-centered or teacher-directed. This type of curriculum emerges from children's ideas and interests and then is framed by the teachers into more general concepts (Forman & Fyfe, 2011). For example, children may be interested in making an amusement park for the birds that visit their outdoor learning space and teachers could direct this learning by asking how they could make the birds feel less anxious about being far away from home (Forman & Fyfe, 2011). Another type of curriculum proposed by Forman & Fyfe (2011) is teacher-provoked and then child-engaged, where the teachers propose a topic and then engage the children's minds. For example, a teacher may invite a small group of children to join her in observing squirrels playing outside the classroom window and ask probing questions to engage the children (Forman & Fyfe, 2011).

The hundred languages of children is an approach within the Reggio Emilia setting used to allow children to express, understand, interpret, and communicate their learning using a variety of different media (Fraser, 2012; Wexler, 2004). Malaguzzi's poem "No Way. The Hundred is There." (as cited in Edwards et al., 2011) describes how children are made up of one hundred languages, hands, thoughts, ways of thinking, playing, and speaking, etc. When preparing learning experiences, it is essential for educators to allow children to express their learning in ways that are comfortable to them because "although children may not have 100 languages available to them, they certainly have more than the spoken words of their native tongue" (Forman & Fyfe, 2011, p. 257). For example, when asked to retell a story, some children may use musical symbols such as tone, timber, and rhythm to capture the action while others could capture the action by drawing stick figures crouching and pouncing across sequenced frames (Forman & Fyfe, 2011). It is essential for educators to understand that each child is unique and has her or his own strategies for learning; therefore, preparing a varied environment is important (Soncini, 2011).

Respect and reciprocity go hand in hand in the Reggio approach through the respectful atmosphere created by valued interaction and the exchange of ideas among children, families, educators, and the environment (Fraser, 2012). Respect is fundamental to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, especially concerning the children of the program (Hawkins, 2011). Hawkins (2011) explains, "To have respect for children is more than recognizing their potentials in the abstract. It is also about seeking out and valuing their accomplishments – however small these

may appear by the normal standards of adults" (p. 80). Reciprocity is developed in the Reggio approach through the trusting relationships built among all members of the community, allowing them to open up and share their ideas comfortably (Fraser, 2012). Each of the 12 guiding principles described by Fraser (2012) guide the Reggio Emilia philosophy and are essential to the quality of education provided at the childcare centers.

The Environment as the Third Teacher

The way the Reggio Emilia approach accomplishes a high quality environment is by considering the environment as the third teacher. This approach allows children to be in charge of their learning and gives educators the time to observe and reflect on how the children are engaged in their learning and what they are interested in. The Reggio Emilia approach is built upon a socio-constructivist model that states knowledge is constructed through interactions with both people and the environment (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). In Reggio Emilia-inspired schools, the physical environment holds great importance because it reveals a lot about how children are regarded as well as the value assigned to the process of teaching and learning (New, 1998). In a Reggio Emilia setting, the environment is the third teacher and it is believed that "the spaces that teachers create for children seem to hold enduring memories for them that have a powerful influence on what they value later in life" (Fraser, 2012, p. 112). Thus, when educators are planning an environment for young children they need to think about the effect it will have on their adult lives (Fraser, 2012).

When creating an environment that acts as the third teacher there are eight principles that need to be addressed: aesthetics, active learning, collaboration, transparency, bringing the outdoors in, flexibility, relationship, and reciprocity (Fraser, 2012). The aesthetics of a Reggio environment come from the amount of detail put into the creation of every aspect of the space (Fraser, 2012). When choosing color for the environment one should use a range of subtle colors, while accent colors can be used to emphasize different areas or objects (Zini, 2005). Lighting is important to the aesthetics of the Reggio environment and it should be illuminated from a variety of sources such as incandescent, fluorescent, vapor, and halogen (Zini, 2005). The children and educators should be able to manipulate the lighting in the room using dimmers to change the intensity as well as change the color of the light (Zini, 2005).

The principle of active learning can be achieved by providing a rich, stimulating environment that offers many choices and provokes children to discover a variety of materials while actively exploring, investigating, and solving problems (Fraser, 2012). An active learning environment can be achieved by providing multiple sensorial experiences to help children construct their knowledge and memory (Gandini, 2011a). Gandini (2011a) suggests that an active learning experience offered in a Reggio program where children are able to explore their senses could involve allowing children to help prepare food in the kitchen, giving them the opportunity to use multiple senses while cooking and tasting food. When designing a rich sensory environment it is essential to make use of color, light, sound, and smell because they correspond to young children's cognitive processes (Zini, 2005). The materials offered in the room should be rich and diverse with features that can change over a period of time (e.g., wood, stone, flowers, fabrics) as well as materials that will remain unchanged (e.g., glass, steel) (Zini, 2005).

Collaboration is achieved in a Reggio environment by providing opportunities for children to work individually and as part of a group with other children and adults (Fraser, 2012). Reggio Emilia classrooms are set up to inspire collaborative partnerships among parents, educators, and

children (Edwards et al., 2011). This allows children to learn the dynamics of group work and the importance of their individual contributions (Fraser, 2012). Creating large murals to be hung in the entrance of the school is an example of a project that allows children to work in collaboration with others to aid in the construction of knowledge (Fraser, 2012).

Transparency is achieved in the Reggio environment through the importance of transparent materials throughout the space such as mirrors, windows, internal glass walls, glass objects, transparent film, large plastic sheets, etc. (Fraser, 2012). Transparent materials allow for light to flow more easily through the space, which is an important aspect of the Reggio environment (Fraser, 2012). Materials are put into transparent containers to spark children's interest and add to the transparency of the room (Gandini, 2011a). Transparency can be used metaphorically to describe the reason behind the documentation of children's work on the walls of the classroom and entranceways of the school (Fraser, 2012). This allows the children's learning to be "transparent" and available to the parents and the children to allow for continued growth and reflection (Fraser, 2012). Malaguzzi explains that "throughout the school, the walls are used as spaces for both temporary and permanent exhibits about what the children and teachers have created: our walls speak and document" (Gandini, 2011b, p. 41). Displaying the children's creations on the walls of the classroom and in the hallways of the school gives the students a sense of autonomy by seeing their work as important.

Bringing the outdoors in helps to connect children with their roots and helps them to build respect for their community by strengthening their sense of belonging in their world (Fraser, 2012). Natural materials such as pine cones, shells, or pebbles of varying size and color contribute to creating a particular culture in the classroom and an environment as a living, changing system (Gandini, 2011a). Fraser (2012) explains that the windows in the classroom need to be low enough for the children to look out of them so they can watch changes in the weather and the seasons. It is also important to give the children an opportunity to "bring the outdoors in" and have them contribute materials to the classroom (Fraser, 2012). This could be done by going on a nature walk and having the children collect elements from the outdoors, or encouraging children to bring natural elements in that they found at home or from different places they have visited.

Flexibility can be achieved in a Reggio environment by being flexible with space, time, and materials (Fraser, 2012). Creating a flexible Reggio environment requires educators to think differently and plan the classroom to ensure it allows for flexible use of the space and materials (Fraser 2012). For example, instead of creating separate centers for art and science materials, the materials need to be available for use wherever they may be needed within the classroom (Fraser, 2012). Gandini (2011a) describes that the Reggio environment needs to be both flexible and adaptable to ensure the children and educators are able to manipulate the space as they use it.

Reciprocity is achieved in a Reggio environment by ensuring it is "open to change and responsive to the children, parents, and community" (Fraser, 2012, p. 129). Fraser (2012) explains that the concept of the environment acting as a third teacher gives it the qualities of a living being which signifies that it needs to be responsive to the classroom community just as a good teacher would be. Educators have to reflect critically on what kind of learning environment they want to provide and examine each element they include to ensure it reflects their values (Fraser, 2012). In order for educators to create an environment that is responsive to the children of the classroom they need to actively listen to the children and provide learning experiences based on their interests (Edwards, 2011).

Lastly, relationship in the Reggio environment refers to how objects are shown in relation to other materials in the room. For example, Lego blocks could be laid out with pieces of

driftwood on a large mirror to explore the relationship between the artificial and natural worlds (Fraser, 2012). The idea of relationship is also seen in the process of documentation because it is designed to observe the relationship between what children are doing and the underlying theories and principles of the program (Fraser, 2012). When setting up the Reggio learning environment it is important to provide spaces for children and adults to work in small groups to allow for more face-to-face interactions to build stronger relationships in the learning community (Gandini, 2011b).

This literature review examined the Reggio Emilia approach to learning with an in-depth focus on the principle of the environment as the third teacher. The Reggio Emilia approach to education supports the idea of children constructing their own knowledge while interacting with their environment through a socio-constructivist view of learning (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). When constructing an environment that acts as the third teacher it is important to consider who will be using the space to ensure one is providing an environment with rich learning possibilities (Carter, 2007). When exploring the eight principles of creating an environment that acts as a third teacher it is essential to understand their interconnectedness within the classroom setting (Fraser, 2012). The effectiveness of the environment's ability to act as a third teacher relies on the support of each of the principles as a whole, not individually.

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Kelsey Robson, RECE, OCT, MEd, is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. Kelsey began her career as an Early Childhood Educator with the District School Board of Niagara in the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program while completing her Bachelor of Early Childhood Education at Brock University in Ontario, Canada. She then completed her Bachelor of Education with a focus on the primary/junior divisions. The focus of her MEd was on the Reggio Emilia approach and she hopes to soon travel to Italy to visit the Reggio schools. Her areas of research include: early learning environments, play, and the Reggio Emilia approach to education.