

# Reggio Emilo Approach

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## Reggio Emilia Approach

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Early Childhood Education, Pedagogy, Constructivism

**Proponents:** Loris Malaguzzi

### 1. Core Principles

The Reggio Emilia Approach is a comprehensive and philosophical approach to early childhood education, distinguishing itself from standardized models by its profound emphasis on the child as a proactive, capable, and resourceful protagonist in their own development. The pedagogy is fundamentally rooted in a strong constructivist perspective, asserting that children do not passively receive knowledge but actively construct understanding through interaction with their environment, peers, and adults. This perspective necessitates that educational settings move beyond traditional didactic instruction, instead fostering environments where exploration and discovery serve as the primary mechanisms for learning, thereby validating the child's inherent curiosity and intellectual potential.

A central tenet of the Reggio philosophy is the concept of relationships and participation, often conceptualized as the "three subjects" of education: the child, the parents, and the teachers. These three groups are viewed as interdependent partners who co-construct the learning experience within a context of mutual respect and shared responsibility. Furthermore, the approach deeply embeds principles of community and democracy, recognizing that the school is not an isolated institution but an integral part of the larger civil society. This integration encourages dialogue, critical thinking, and the development of civic responsibility from the earliest years, ensuring that children understand their role within a cooperative social structure.

The curriculum is not pre-scripted but emergent, built upon the documented interests, questions, and theories articulated by the children themselves, a process known as *progettazione*. This emergent curriculum demands highly skilled and responsive teaching teams who operate not as distributors of facts, but as researchers, observers, and co-learners alongside the children. The guiding goal is to inculcate the principles of respect, responsibility, and community, moving far beyond mere academic achievement toward holistic development where emotional, social, and cognitive growth are inextricably linked and valued equally within the educational experience.

### 2. Historical Development and Origin

The Reggio Emilia Approach originated in the years immediately following the devastating conclusion of World War II in the city of Reggio Emilia and the surrounding villages in Northern Italy. This period was characterized by immense socio-political upheaval and a powerful desire among the local populace, particularly mothers and fathers, to rebuild society on democratic foundations, beginning with the education of their children. The movement was born out of a

collective decision by these parents to found and manage their own schools, seeing education as a political act of liberation and renewal rather than mere custodial care.

The critical turning point in formalizing this grassroots effort occurred with the involvement of Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), a psychologist and educator. Malaguzzi was deeply impressed by the energy and intellectual commitment of the community-led schools and began collaborating closely with the parents to develop a coherent pedagogical philosophy. He served as the primary pedagogical director for the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia for several decades, transforming them from informal community projects into a sophisticated system of high-quality early childhood education recognized internationally.

The development of the approach was strongly influenced by various progressive educational thinkers, including John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, though Malaguzzi skillfully adapted these theories into a unique Italian context characterized by humanist values and an emphasis on aesthetic richness. The schools were officially established as municipal institutions, which ensured their independence from both church and state control over curriculum, allowing the local community and educators the autonomy necessary to continually refine and evolve the approach based on empirical observation and dialogue. The name itself is derived directly from the city, symbolizing the deep local commitment to and ownership of the educational project.

### 3. Key Concepts: The Hundred Languages of Children

The most poetic and perhaps best-known concept articulated by Malaguzzi is "The Hundred Languages of Children." This metaphor challenges the traditional Western educational bias toward linguistic and logical-mathematical forms of expression, positing instead that children are endowed with an almost infinite array of symbolic and expressive means through which they can represent reality, communicate ideas, and learn about the world. These languages include, but are not limited to, drawing, sculpting, painting, dramatic play, musical expression, dance, construction, and shadow play.

The core assumption behind the Hundred Languages holds that restricting children to verbal or written representation stifles their capacity for deep thinking and comprehensive understanding. Therefore, the Reggio setting is deliberately rich in materials and opportunities for children to explore concepts simultaneously across multiple modalities. For example, a child exploring the life cycle of a plant might draw it, sculpt it in clay, narrate a story about it, and graph its growth--each activity offering a different pathway to knowledge and strengthening the overall cognitive structure.

To facilitate these diverse expressive forms, Reggio schools institutionalized the *Atelier*, or studio workshop, and the role of the *Atelierista*, the art specialist. The Atelier is not merely an arts and crafts room but a space dedicated to the creative process, furnished with high-quality materials and tools designed to encourage complex symbolic work and aesthetic exploration. The Atelierista

works collaboratively with the classroom teachers (known as pedagogistas) to integrate artistic expression seamlessly into all areas of academic inquiry and project work, ensuring that the "hundred languages" are genuinely utilized as vehicles for learning, rather than as peripheral activities.

#### 4. The Role of the Environment (The Third Teacher)

In the Reggio philosophy, the physical environment of the school is considered to be the "third teacher," following the parents (first) and the educators (second). This concept elevates the design, organization, and aesthetics of the learning spaces to a critical pedagogical tool, shaping both the social dynamics and the intellectual engagement of the children. The environment is meticulously designed to be aesthetically pleasing, functional, organized, and, crucially, reflective of the children's ongoing work and interests.

Reggio schools prioritize features that promote transparency, connection, and documentation. Architecture often incorporates large windows, mirrors, and glass panels to foster a visual connection between interior and exterior spaces and among different classrooms, symbolizing the interconnectedness of all learning activities. The use of natural light and natural materials, such as wood, stone, and various textures, is paramount, creating a calming, stimulating, and home-like atmosphere that encourages respect and attentive interaction with materials.

Furthermore, the environment is structured to invite interaction and small-group collaboration. Spaces are arranged to facilitate focused project work, provide intimate areas for reflection, and offer open spaces for large-group meetings. Every corner of the school, from the corridors to the kitchens, is considered a potential learning space. The aesthetic choices--including the arrangement of displayed documentation and the quality of the furniture--reflect a profound respect for the child and a belief that children deserve environments that are as beautiful and thoughtfully curated as any professional research institution.

#### 5. Documentation and Assessment

Documentation is a hallmark and essential methodological component of the Reggio Emilia Approach, serving multiple critical functions within the pedagogical cycle. It refers to the systematic observation, recording, and interpretation of children's experiences, conversations, artwork, and project work. Educators use a variety of media, including written transcripts of dialogue, photographs, video recordings, and displays of finished and unfinished work, to make the learning process visible to the children, parents, and other educators.

This documentation acts as the primary form of assessment, shifting the focus away from standardized testing and toward a qualitative understanding of the child's learning strategies and intellectual growth. By meticulously reviewing the evidence of a child's engagement, teachers gain

deeper insights into the child's theories about the world, their knowledge acquisition processes, and the development of their identity. This process is reflective: it allows teachers to critically evaluate their own practice and the effectiveness of the environment, subsequently informing the direction of the emergent curriculum (*progettazione*).

Crucially, documentation serves a powerful communicative purpose. When displayed prominently within the school and shared with families, it elevates the perception of children's work from simple play to serious, meaningful research. It creates a narrative of the learning journey, reinforcing the competency of the child and inviting parents to actively participate in the educational dialogue. This transparency builds the crucial bridge between the home and the school, solidifying the idea that education is a shared community enterprise.

## 6. Applications and Global Spread

The Reggio Emilia Approach, having proven highly successful within its Italian municipal context, has garnered significant global recognition since the late 1980s, influencing pedagogical practice across preschools, primary schools, and teacher training institutions worldwide. Its principles have been adopted, adapted, or inspired educational programs in North America, Northern Europe, Australasia, and Asia, leading to the formation of numerous networks and associations dedicated to disseminating the philosophy, such as Reggio Children International.

However, the application of the approach outside of Reggio Emilia itself presents significant challenges related to fidelity and contextualization. The original schools benefited from deep cultural roots, substantial local public funding, and the continuous oversight of Loris Malaguzzi and a highly specialized training infrastructure. Institutions attempting to implement the approach must grapple with issues such as securing adequate funding for the rich material environment, ensuring continuous, intensive professional development for teachers, and navigating differing national educational policies that may prioritize standardized metrics over emergent curriculum.

Despite these difficulties, the international impact has been profound, particularly in shifting pedagogical dialogue toward a greater respect for child agency, the importance of aesthetic environments, and the critical role of systematic documentation. Many schools globally now incorporate elements such as the Atelier, project-based learning, and reflective documentation, even if they do not adhere strictly to every tenet of the municipal model, demonstrating the powerful and transferable nature of its core philosophical commitment to the capable child.

## 7. Criticisms and Limitations

While widely celebrated, the Reggio Emilia Approach is subject to several academic and practical criticisms, primarily revolving around its replicability, cost, and the perceived demands it places on educators. One major limitation is the high level of funding and resources required to maintain the

ideal environment--the "third teacher." The dedicated space of the Atelier, the employment of specialized Atelieristas, the low child-to-teacher ratios, and the constant acquisition of high-quality, complex materials make the model significantly more expensive to operate than typical public early childhood settings, raising questions about equity and accessibility.

Another significant criticism focuses on the immense demands placed upon the teaching staff. The role of the Reggio educator transcends simple instruction; they must be trained as keen observers, researchers, documenters, and facilitators who can collaboratively design curriculum based on real-time data (documentation). Critics argue that achieving this level of intellectual rigor and continuous professional development is exceptionally difficult to sustain in diverse public school systems where teacher training is often standardized and time for joint planning and reflection is limited.

Finally, when exported internationally, the approach faces the challenge of cultural translation. The Reggio Emilia schools arose from a specific post-war Italian political and cultural context emphasizing community collectivism and civic engagement. Adopting the model in cultures that prioritize individual achievement, high-stakes testing, or divergent family structures may dilute the pedagogical intent, resulting in a superficial adoption of the aesthetic elements without fully embracing the underlying democratic and relationship-focused philosophy. Maintaining the integrity and fidelity of the complex pedagogical system remains a persistent topic of debate among practitioners and researchers.

## Further Reading

[Reggio Emilia approach \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Loris Malaguzzi Biography \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[North American Reggio Emilia Alliance](#)