

Inspirations from one toddler classroom: Basics of the Reggio Emilia approach

“How do we see ourselves as bees creating our own honey, as educators taking inspiration from powerful values and ideals that we, too, embrace and living them within our own context?” —Louise Boyd Cadwell

We think of the teachers as bees who know that creating a good bee garden depends on the flowers within it. The flowers in our Reggio-inspired garden at the University of Nevada at Reno are the program director, supervisors, university faculty, community professionals, staff, families, and the children.

Learning about approaches to early childhood education prepares educators and child care professionals to create high quality programs. This article outlines 14 basic principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, modified from Gandini’s chapter, “Foundations of the Reggio Emilia Approach,” in Hendrick’s (2004) edited volume *Next Steps Toward Teaching the Reggio Way: Accepting the Challenge to Change*, and shares examples developed from these principles.

Using the ideas of the Reggio approach may challenge some educators and caregiving professionals.

However, having clear examples of the principles makes the Reggio approach seem real, and can help future and current early childhood professionals think about their work in new and interesting ways. The examples below come from the toddler classroom of one of this article’s authors, Jentry Hammond.

Principle: The image of the child

The *image* of each child is the belief that every child has rights, not just needs (Hewett 2001). Believing that every child has rights promotes the child’s strengths, potential, and desire to discover his or her own world (Hewett 2001). This principle reminds teachers to view each child not as needy or deficient, but as a source of strength and inspiration.

The following example—taken from Jentry’s experience teaching 2-year-olds in a Reggio-inspired classroom—demonstrates a child discovering his own image.

Ryan smeared brown paint all over his hands, then spread the paint over the lower part of his face. Ryan shared his intent as Jentry helped clean his face:

Ryan: Beard!

Jentry: Did you paint yourself a beard?

Ryan: Yeah! Daddy!

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Jentry: *Oh, you painted a beard so you could look like Daddy?*

Ryan (*smiling*): *Yeah!*

By having the freedom to experiment, Ryan shared with his teacher his interest in facial features and illustrated what an important model his father is in his life. Encouraging discovery methods through which children may explore their own interests and abilities—within safe limits—allows children the freedom to discover, create, and share their image.

RECOGNIZE THAT IT IS ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.

As Malaguzzi (1994) noted, “There are hundreds of different images of the child.” To help discover your image of each child, think about the following:

- Do you have a strong image of each child in your care?
- How do you acknowledge that each child brings thoughts, feelings, and experiences to the classroom each morning or afternoon?
- Do you revisit your ideas about each child as he or she grows?

Principle: Children’s relationships and interactions

Bennett (2001) summarizes the Reggio philosophy on relationships and interactions by encouraging us to “recognize that it is all about relationships.” Malaguzzi (Kim et al. 2009) explains that the heart of education is

the relationships among children, families, teachers, and the wider society. Child care centers and early childhood classrooms are places where these relationships intersect.

Conversations during small-group activities and collaboration with families on projects strengthen relationships among children. An interest in mailboxes and letters in Jentry’s classroom, for example, evolved into a project with parents and grandparents leaving surprise letters for the children in a classroom mailbox.

Connections to the wider world are made through resources brought into the classroom. Natural materials such as sand, water, leaves, and light encourage the children to learn first-hand about the world around them. Teachers can ask for children’s help in choosing physical materials for the classroom.

Principle: Rights of children, parents, and teachers

Every child has the right to high quality care and education, parents have the right to classroom involvement, and teachers have the right to professional growth (Gandini 2004).

This principle inspired an interactive bulletin board titled: “What goals do you have for your child?” in Jentry’s classroom. Next to their child’s picture, each family provided a goal they had set for their child, and together these became the current classroom goals. In this example, the children receive high quality care because those who know them best, the parents, exercise their rights to participate by setting goals. Finally, teachers have the right to grow professionally as they partner with parents to learn more about the children and their families.

Malaguzzi asserts that respect for these three rights will “make it possible for [children, parents, and teachers] to construct their learning together . . .

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[and] render the school an amiable place that is welcoming, alive and authentic” (Gandini 2004).

Principle: The role of the parents

All parents have valuable experiences and skills that can work in tandem with the program. Teachers can consider engaging parents to help with and discuss projects with their children, participate on advisory boards (Bennett 2001), co-coordinate classroom activities, and have daily interactions with the children (McClow and Gillespie 1998).

THINK ABOUT TEACHERS AND PARENTS
AS CO-ORGANIZERS OF
SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES.

Our center also promotes the role of the parents by having an open-door policy. Due to frequent parent visits, children know each other’s parents. Think about teachers and parents as co-organizers of special opportunities, such as social gatherings, because this partnership allows teachers and parents to express their support and connect with the classroom and each other.

Principle: The role of space

The Reggio philosophy suggests that the classroom environment acts as a third teacher (Strong-Wilson and Ellis 2007). The website of one Reggio school, www.aboutenglish.it/comeniusasilo2/reggioconcepts.htm (as cited in Rael, Sergi, Housley, Eckhart, and Hosier-Behmaram 2010) explains that physical space promotes relationships. Teachers carefully consider what arrangement of the space will appeal to the children.

Uses of space in Jentry’s classroom include the following:

- fine-motor activities at tables,
- sensory bins, and
- art materials at an easel.

Well-organized open shelves allow children to find natural materials (Gandini 1998), which are carefully chosen and grouped. For example, during a tool exploration in Jentry’s classroom, hammers and nails

were offered with such materials as clay, cardboard, a pumpkin, Styrofoam®, and wood. The children selected materials that intrigued them and experimented with hammering nails into the materials.

Careful consideration of space results in beautiful displays of materials, such as colored pencils, chalk, pastels, and watercolors in attractive glass jars, organized by color. This attractive display entices children to explore, while encouraging them to treat the materials with the same respect with which they are displayed.

Respect for nature is also a classroom theme presented through carefully arranged centerpieces of pine cones, stones, sea shells, leaves, and flowers displayed on tables. Natural elements such as sand, water, and leaves are provided in sensory bins. The materials and space promote choices, problem-solving, discovery, and relationships (Gandini 2004). Teachers invite children, singularly or in groups, to play with the materials.

Principle: Relationships in small groups

Invitations, or activities, are displayed in an enticing way to pique the children’s interests. Two to three invitations are presented to the children daily. The children may decide which invitation they want to explore first, and they have the flexibility to explore different activities as their interests change. Offering multiple invitations in different spaces around the classroom allows children to separate themselves into small groups. This allows teachers to have more one-on-one interactions with each child.

Teachers may pose open-ended questions to help children solve problems. This approach helps children recognize their points of view and challenges them to accept others’ views. Children’s relationships thrive because their ideas are heard and elaborated upon by teachers and peers through debates and discussion (Kim and Darling 2009).

Principle: The role of time and continuity

The Reggio philosophy discourages time constraints on the duration of classroom projects. The goal of a project is to let the learning take place in a comfortable environment, and to let the satisfaction of a job well done mark its completion (Gandini 2004). Time spent forming and maintaining relationships is also respected.

The developmental needs of children may lead to a new classroom assignment each year. This means that each year, the entire class moves to a new room, which better accommodates the children's growth and development. Despite the transition of classrooms, however, the caregivers in Jentry's center stay consistent for three years. Teachers and parents can feel a mix of excitement and worry about the yearly transition, but from Jentry's experience, continuity of care and the strong bonds developed over the three years, helps ease this transition.

Principle: Teachers as partners

The role of a Reggio teacher is to be a learning partner, equally approaching teaching and learning (Saunders and Carter-Steele 2010). Teachers observe and reflect to discover more about each child's ideas, hypotheses, and theories (Gandini 2004). Teachers are active observers and steer activities inspired by children (Hewett 2001).

An interaction between Jentry and Amy demonstrates this partnership:

Jentry: What would you like to do today, Amy?

Amy: Ummm... paint, please!

Jentry: That's a great idea; we can paint! What would you like to paint with?

Amy: Ummm... yellow paint, please!

Teachers can view themselves as partners in children's learning, actively accept the direction of activities from children, and reflect on the partnership activities.

Principle: Collaboration as the backbone

In Reggio-inspired models, collaboration occurs within the classroom, between the two head teachers, and outside the classroom. The teachers are

responsible for collaborating with one another to promote discovery (Hertzog 2001). This teamwork happens through daily discussions of new curriculum ideas and children's new skills. Records can be kept using such documentation as daily journals.

Talking with another teacher about the interactions that occurred during the observation is important for reflective practice and collaboration. Support from the other teachers and staff is ongoing and can be heightened during teacher collaboration meetings and professional development days. Collaboration meetings between teachers and staff can serve as think tanks, allowing questions, suggestions, and brainstorming ideas to be shared. Professional development days are reserved for teachers to receive current trainings in early childhood education.

A unique aspect of a Reggio-inspired program is its connection to the local community, such as a partnership with a museum. As a teacher, Jentry is invited to participate in local museum tours. She and her co-teachers can explore and study classic and modern exhibits. This exploration and thinking promotes the teachers' creativity and curriculum planning.

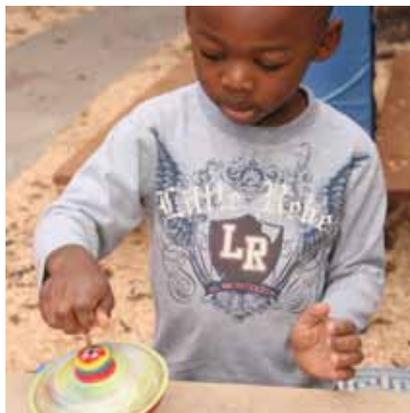
Jentry viewed a light exhibit during a museum tour, for example, and then introduced flashlights and different colored lenses in her classroom. This spurred a light exploration project.

Principle: Cooperation and organization

Organization requires its own principle because it is essential to the Reggio philosophy. Gandini explains that organization makes possible the cooperation and collaboration that take place.

Children's cues are often used to facilitate structure and organization in the classroom. For example, Jentry noticed that after snack time a few children

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began moving chairs to the carpet and patting their knees, requesting the good morning song. Jentry asked the children: “Are we ready for circle time?” and they confirmed: “Circle time!”

An organized routine throughout the day allows the children to expect and request which events will be next. These one-word statements and signs used by the children are transitions to let teachers know which part of the routine is expected. Teachers can use an organized daily routine to provide children comfort, promoting trust between the children and teachers.

Principle: Beyond teachers, atelierista, and pedagogista

According to Gandini, an *atelierista* is “a teacher who is trained in the visual arts and works closely with other teachers and the children” (2004). The lack of an *atelierista* is a major shortcoming of our Reggio-inspired program.

But our center has a *pedagogista*—someone specialized in educational theory, who helps teachers interpret the Reggio philosophy and provides ideas and support as the philosophy is put into practice (Gandini 2004). A *pedagogista* mediates relationships with parents and administrators, helps coordinate training, and follows the development of classroom projects (Gandini 2004). The *pedagogista* in our center feels that her role is not completely true to Reggio philosophy, however, because she is not part of a team of *pedagogistas*.

Part of the *pedagogista's* role in our center is to serve as a curriculum coach. Her focus is on emerging projects in each classroom. She has regular contact through the sharing of daily journals and makes frequent visits and observations to guide and expand teachers' ideas. She also initiates classroom and center-wide collaborations between teachers and offers curriculum training.

Principle: The power of documentation

Documentation allows for public displays of learning processes (Kim and Darling 2009). Displaying documentation enables parents, teachers, and community members to see what happens in classrooms (Rael et al. 2010). Documentation provides children with “a visual memory of what they have done and thereby encourages a revisiting and expanding of

old ideas, or the inspiration and development of new ideas” (Hewett 2001).

Examples of documentation include daily journals and displays of completed projects. A daily journal is a written description with accompanying pictures documenting each day's activities and discoveries. Via e-mail, parents receive daily journals about the explorations and interests that take place in Jentry's classroom. This window into their child's daily activities informs parents and encourages their involvement (Gandini 2004). Parents tell us that this approach makes them feel connected to the classroom and curriculum. Jentry has access to translators on staff to help communicate with families whose first language is not English.

DOCUMENTATION ALLOWS FOR PUBLIC DISPLAYS OF LEARNING PROCESSES.

Daily journals are also a useful reflection tool. While writing a daily journal, for example, teachers may reflect on a child's experiences with materials, enabling future curriculum planning and direction. Teachers can also keep daily journals in a binder in the classroom so the children may revisit them, reinforcing earlier discoveries by promoting conversations about past events.

Displaying completed projects offers these same benefits. A current project displayed in Jentry's classroom is a house the children created out of a cardboard box. Visual displays of projects spur conversations among the children, their teachers, and parents.

Principle: Flexible planning

Although teachers may start out with a curriculum goal, Reggio-inspired programs encourage flexible planning. Consider this example:

Abby began smearing paint all over her hands. As usual, it wasn't long before her cheeks, nose, and arms were covered in slick and slimy paint. Once her skin was thoroughly coated, Abby looked down at the smock she was wearing. She paused. An idea was forming. She seemed to be asking herself,

“Would the paint cover my clothes as well?” That spark of curiosity encouraged her to use both hands to smear paint all over her shirt. Her hypothesis was correct: paint would cover and change the color of her shirt. Inspired by Abby’s discovery, a painting invitation in Jentry’s classroom the following day encouraged the children to explore small tubs of tie-dye and T-shirts.

Each discovery forms the curriculum. Abby’s interest was in covering different surfaces with paint to confirm whether they could indeed be covered, and what else might happen. The subsequent teacher invitation encouraged this exploration of painting shirts, testing Abby’s hypothesis further. When planning invitations, teachers may guide the activity with a certain goal in mind, but the direction of interest is steered by the children.

Principle: Projects

Ongoing projects within Reggio-inspired classrooms encourage the children to become researchers who ask questions, experiment, and discover answers (Kim and Darling 2009). Projects are focused on events and observations in the child’s everyday life, and last as long as the children stay engaged: weeks, months, or even a full year (Bennett 2001).

An extensive project that evolved in Jentry’s classroom was paint exploration. The project began with the introduction of paint by exploring its texture and properties. This interest in smearing paint led to the mixing of primary colors to create secondary colors. This discovery of new colors led the way to printing and using various objects to create paint marks and tracks.

Through the course of this project, color vocabulary was not only expanded, but experienced. The children learned much from each other by observing

one another and building on one another’s discoveries. This allowed the project to develop organically.

Does this seem daunting? Start small

Classrooms and curricula are as diverse as the children in them. The exploration and adaptation of Reggio principles can add to a program’s uniqueness. Shifting toward a new philosophy and adopting the 14 principles may seem daunting or unrealistic, but you can explore the approach by starting with a single principle. In fact, when our program began exploring Reggio-inspired principles 15 years ago, the staff began slowly, with a single concept.

THE REGGIO EMILIA PHILOSOPHY
IS ONE OF GREAT
DEPTH AND DEDICATION.

The act of documentation, for example, is a principle that any classroom can explore. Documentation enables teachers to reflect and stay connected to the image of each child. Reviewing documentation with children reinforces each child’s identity as a learner by revisiting what they learned and encouraging future interests (Curtis and Carter 2008). The examples from the principles of the image of the child and documentation can enrich any pre-primary or primary setting.

The Reggio Emilia philosophy is one of great depth and dedication. When committing to any of its principles, one should expect to spend more time

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planning outside the classroom. This planning runs the gamut from reflecting on children's thoughts and actions on a daily basis to co-planning social gatherings with families. Reggio is a mutually rewarding philosophy that educates teachers alongside young children.

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