

The challenge of assessment: scaling-up the Reggio Emilia approach in the USA?

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The distinctive approach to early childhood education that was developed in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia is known and admired by many educators around the world. Yet, given its renown, the number of schools practising a Reggio-inspired approach is arguably smaller than some would expect. In this article Lella Gandini examines the challenges faced in assessing the Reggio approach in the United States – notably the demands for measurable proof of results.

Over the past three decades the early childhood educational experience of the Italian city of Reggio Emilia, population 170,000, has created a worldwide movement. It has inspired educators in a variety of cultural, political and economic contexts, testifying to both the high quality and the adaptability of this approach. Since I published the first article about the Reggio Emilia approach in the USA in 1984, I have encountered many hundreds of teachers at presentations and conferences and visited many schools inspired by the principles of the Reggio philosophy and practice. Interest continues to increase.

Yet this story of success also presents a puzzle for some people: why, they ask, has the Reggio approach not spread even more widely among schools in the USA, given the high regard in which it is held? Three main factors can be identified. The first is that Reggio educators have purposely not set out to encourage their way of working to be copied. Unlike some other educational approaches, such as Montessori, there is no prescribed written definition of what constitutes a Reggio approach, and no way to be officially certified as a Reggio Emilia school. Integral to the

Reggio philosophy is a deep respect for place, culture and social diversity, such that the overall approach is not codified into a rigid orthodoxy or intended to be instituted and observed in precisely the same manner wherever it may be found.

On the contrary, the local topography, climate, ecology and human history should be considered fundamental raw materials for children's exploration. Dictating how educators should organise a curriculum built around the local environment, or how children should follow a set sequence of developing one specific skill before moving on to the prescribed 'next step', has no place in the Reggio approach. It is, rather, a philosophy to be adapted in a way that respects new cultural and social contexts. There are many ways to create a Reggio-inspired school without compromising fundamental principles of the approach.

A second factor has to do with the question of 'cultural knots' – a term used by Ben Mardell in the book *Making Learning Visible*, published by Harvard's Project Zero and Reggio Children in 2001 (Giudici *et al.*, 2001). Cultural knots are deep-rooted ways

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of thinking and doing that may be difficult to challenge and change. To take one example, in US culture time is often divided into strictly scheduled chunks, with educators thinking of their days as fragmented into blocks of 30 minutes. The Reggio approach, in contrast, offers a much more flexible attitude towards how the day develops, with learning experiences typically running over considerably longer time periods. Educators in other cultures may need to untie this and other 'cultural knots' before they are able to apply the Reggio philosophy in their respective contexts.

Thirdly – and this is the main subject of this article – there is the question of measurement and assessment. While private providers in the pre-primary sector have substantial flexibility to adopt the approaches they choose, educational providers in the USA who rely on public funding must demonstrably meet defined standards to maintain that funding. Assessments of these standards have a positive intent, namely to ensure that children are learning. But they can also generate fear of trying anything new. Teachers may understandably focus on ensuring that children know what they need to pass tests, often to the detriment of other learning.

There is a widespread and mistaken view that the Reggio approach is incompatible with assessments of children's progress. As this article will show, numerous examples testify to the fact that Reggio-inspired schools can

pass assessments required to maintain public funding. It will then also describe how researchers are working to develop new methods to assess children, with the potential to persuade more schools to adopt the Reggio approach.

Reggio-inspired schools and assessment

How can the Reggio approach – featuring children's construction of learning through inquiry and expressive language – be combined with a curriculum that demands specific outcomes and assessments that require demonstrations that children are learning according to defined standards? Several schools and even school systems have found satisfactory answers.

Some of these answers build on a distinguishing feature of Reggio early education: documentation. In-depth documentation reveals the learning paths that children take and the processes they use in their search for meaning. Documentation helps teachers and children reflect on prior experience; listen to each other's ideas, theories, insights, and understandings; and make decisions together about future learning paths. A commonly noted feature of children in Reggio schools is their meta-cognitive understanding of their own learning processes. Documentation does not mean measurement. Documentation consists of 'traces of learning', but no trace of learning

The Reggio Emilia approach

The educational journey of Reggio Emilia started with the spontaneous initiative of parents in the countryside who, at the end of the Second World War, built a school from the ruins with the intention of constructing a better life for their children. At the same time, Italian intellectuals were arguing that schools could and should be an engine for social change. A young elementary-school teacher named Loris Malaguzzi biked into the countryside of Reggio Emilia to see for himself what those parents were up to. What he learned led him to emerge as the intellectual and organisational leader of the Reggio Emilia philosophy of education (Edwards *et al.*, 1998).

In the early 1980s, Malaguzzi created an exhibit on what he and his colleagues were achieving in their city. Viewers flocked to the exhibit, and soon it was on display in Sweden and other European countries. In 1987 a new and enlarged version, 'The Hundred Languages of Children', began to tour the USA. This exhibit led to further versions – such as 'The Wonder of Learning', currently in the USA and in Japan – that travel the world over. The publication in 1993 of a collection of essays on the Reggio approach, also titled *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards *et al.*, 1993), did much to stimulate further interest, as have professional societies such as the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, and

those in many other countries, including for example the Korean Association for the Reggio Emilia Approach and the Ontario Reggio Alliance.

Just before his death in 1994, Malaguzzi established Reggio Children, a non-profit organisation. The Reggio Children website (<http://zerosei.comune.re.it/inter/index.htm>) offers this succinct statement of fundamentals:

The Reggio Emilia experience fosters children's intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation. Young children are encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through multiple paths and all their 'languages', including the expressive, communicative, symbolic, cognitive, ethical, metaphorical, logical, imaginative, and relational.

The Reggio approach respects every child's potential for developing competencies. Educators provide multiple choices for exploration, support a collaborative and inquiry-based approach to learning, and favour small-group work and project learning. Two co-teachers work with the same group for 3 years and the school operates on a community-based management method of governance. Education is seen as a communal activity – a sharing of culture through joint exploration by children and adults who construct learning experiences together.

is limited in its interpretation to a standardised unit of measurement. Nonetheless, documentation may

be used as a basis to reveal a child's competences and learning (Fyfe, in press).

For example, Chicago Commons is a charitable organisation that administers programmes for government agencies such as Head Start. Each agency establishes its own standards, although some offer a choice of ways to assess progress. For the Department of Children and Youth Services of Chicago, Chicago Commons' preferred assessment instrument is the 'Work-Sampling System' (wss). The wss asks for evidence, for example, that 4-year-old children show eagerness and curiosity as learners; demonstrate self-confidence; use classroom materials carefully; interact easily with one or more other children; and so on. An assessment is based on regular documentation of children's work that is stored in the portfolios, binders, and journals of the Commons preschool classroom. All this is readily compatible with the Reggio practice of documentation (Scheinfeld *et al.*, 2008).

The same system used for assessment in this disadvantaged environment in Chicago serves equally well in the Fort Hill Infant–Toddler Center and Preschool, a private entity operated by a liberal arts college in Northampton, Massachusetts, serving the children of college professors and others from the community (Lees, 2011).

Chicago Commons personnel treat the various external requirements as challenges; they brainstorm to find creative responses compatible with the main focus of their programme.

A commonly noted feature of children Reggio schools is their meta-cognitive understanding of their own learning processes.

Photo: Courtesy Ochoa Elementary School



Other examples of such responses, including one by a state government, illustrate this point. After the Reggio exhibit visited Columbus, Ohio, in 1993, the Office of Early Learning and School Readiness of the State of Ohio Department of Education undertook a state-wide and multi-year project to organise groups of teachers to study the Reggio approach and to exchange ideas and experiences about implementing it. Together the 42 groups, made up of over 500 teachers, put together an exhibit that brought the fruits of their experience to their fellow teachers and the tax-paying public of the state. These included the attitude they favoured for confronting the issue of having to meet standards:

As a community of learners we know that ... if we embrace standards as guidelines for facilitating meaningful experiences ... then it is possible for school to be a place where emergent curriculum and content standards can coexist and children's research can come alive.

(Shoptaugh *et al.*, 2006)

At the Opal School in Portland, Oregon, a public charter elementary school that includes a preschool, staff members consider standards as resources rather than obstacles. They address the Oregon Academic Content Standards by 'chewing on the big ideas found in the Common Goals, rather than on the bite-sized pieces assigned

to each grade level'. Children at this school score well on the required tests (Graves and MacKay, 2009).

Our final example is the Ochoa Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona, just 65 miles from the Mexican border. Children are predominantly from low-income, Spanish-speaking families. Over three harrowing years, the school was brought back from the brink of closure for failing to meet performance targets under the No Child Left Behind Act. Instead of being left behind, Ochoa, by embracing the Reggio approach, became a model for others to follow. The school recently received a grant to become a Reggio-inspired Community Magnet school. Ochoa intends to follow the examples of and collaborate with the Opal School and Chicago Commons with regard to assessment (Krechevsky *et al.*, 2011).

New directions in assessment

In parallel to these efforts of Reggio-inspired schools to address current assessment requirements, another approach is to find new ways to assess schools and children's learning that are also in keeping with the Reggio approach.

The effort to devise new assessment measures is being led by Making Learning Visible researchers Mara Krechevsky and Ben Mardell at the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero, and Karen Haigh from Columbia College, Chicago. For over a decade these individuals have worked with

educators in public schools to adopt Reggio-inspired ideas and to help children master basic literacy and numeracy skills. Nonetheless, the lack of child outcome data hinders expanding this work to other public settings that serve children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Baker *et al.*, 2010).

The Project Zero researchers therefore plan to create authentic measures of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity in order to assess the impact of Reggio-inspired teaching on children's learning. The assessments will target three primary contexts: teacher-led conversations, child-directed activities, and structured small-group tasks. For example, the assessment of teacher-led conversations with children (whole or small group) will consider such questions as:

- How do teachers facilitate the conversation? Do they refer children to other children?
- Are new statements linked to previous ones and do ideas build on one another? Do children and adults listen to each other?
- What is the purpose of the conversation? Is it to share what children already know or build new knowledge? How do children structure their sentences?
- Do children help each other by providing critiques or explaining ideas to each other? How do they handle conflict? Do they use a language of thinking and emotion?

• Is there laughter and are there expressions of excitement and joy? The assessment of child-directed exploration in groups will focus on:

- What is the quality of the exploration? Given the children's ages and experiences, is the play scenario sophisticated and complex or more limited? Are the children open to multiple solutions?
- What is the quality of the children's interactions? Do they share ideas with one another? How do they solve problems and deal with conflict?
- What is the role of the teacher? How does the teacher respond to children's ideas and questions? How does he or she deal with conflict and issues of sharing and equity?

The structured, small-group task will involve a standardised activity where children will be asked to solve a problem (such as communicating to a new classmate the rules of the school) or use materials to create a product (for example, fashioning a present for the teacher). The group process will be video recorded and analysed for the degree of collaboration and creativity. How the group communicates its ideas (for example, whether it uses some form of written notation) will also be assessed.

The quest for a new method of assessment, conducted thoughtfully, is undeniably worthwhile. The resulting data could provide the evidence needed to persuade administrators that Reggio-inspired schools are superior both in quality and support of

children's learning. Whether this would lead to scaling without sacrificing that quality remains to be seen.

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