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## İtalya'daki Reggio Emilia Gerçekten de Özel mi?

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**Öz:** Avrupa'da Waldorf, Montessori ve Reggio Emilia gibi pek çok eğitimsel yaklaşımlar geliştirilmiştir. Bu eğitimsel yaklaşım modelleri öğretmenlerin rolü, öğretim müfredatları, çocuğun eğitimdeki rolü, sınıf ortamının dizayn edilmesi, sınıf içerisinde kullanılan materyaller, değerlendirmeler ve ölçme-değerlendirme gibi konularda farklılıklar göstermektedirler. Bu farklılıklar birçok araştırmacı tarafından araştırılmıştır ve çocukların gelişimleri için en etkili yöntemin belirlenmesi için hala araştırılmaya devam edilmektedir. Bu kapsamda Reggio Emilia eğitim yaklaşımı, küçük çocuklar ve onların akademik kariyerleri için somut bir uygulama sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, İtalya'da Reggio Emilia yaklaşımının neden ve nasıl başladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmada yaklaşımın tarihsel gelişimi incelenmiş ve bu doğrultuda 2013 yılında İtalya'da gerçekleştirilen Reggio Emilia kongresi tartışılmıştır. Ayrıca araştırmacıların Reggio Emilia yaklaşımını kullanan okulları ziyaretlerinden elde ettikleri izlenimler yansıtılmıştır. Bu okulların ziyaretlerini içeren gerçek deneyimler, araştırmacıların ve eğitimcilerin Reggio Emilia yaklaşımını daha iyi anlamasına yardımcı olacağı düşünülmektedir. Çalışmanın sonucunda Reggio Emilia yaklaşımı kapsamında araştırmacıların yapmış oldukları araştırma ve elde ettikleri deneyimler doğrultusunda öneriler sunulmuştur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Reggio Emilia yaklaşımı, Atelier, Reggio çocukları, Reggio Emilia anaokulları, Okul öncesi eğitim, okul ziyaretleri

## Is Reggio Emilia, Italy Truly Special?

**Abstract:** There are several educational approaches that have been created in Europe; such as the Waldorf Approach, the Montessori Method, and the Reggio Emilia Approach. There are several differences between these methods based on teachers' roles, children's role, classroom environment, materials used in the classroom, as well as the assessment and evaluation methods. These differences have been discussed by many researchers and looked on the more effective methods for child development. However, the Reggio Emilia approach is a unique educational method for young children and their academic careers that has an even more unique history. This article explores how and why the Reggio Emilia Approach started in Italy. It then explores the Winter Institute Conference held in Reggio Emilia, Italy in 2013 through the qualitative method of participant observations. The researchers describe visits to schools that use the Reggio Emilia Approach in Italy. These real world experiences should help educators to better understand the Reggio Emilia Approach. The researchers' thoughts on the Reggio Emilia Approach and how it could be incorporated into the United States and Turkey conclude the article.

**Keywords:** Reggio Emilia approach, atelier, Reggio children, Reggio Emilia preschools, preschool education, school visits.

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## Introduction

Europe has been a rich source of new educational methods; such as the Waldorf Approach, the Montessori Method, and the Reggio Emilia Approach. All three of these educational approaches are strong alternatives toward traditional education and as a source of inspiration for progressive educational reform (Edwards, 2002). Researchers also state that the main reason for creating these new educational approaches was explicit idealism and turn away from violence, toward peace and reconstruction (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; Edwards, 2002; Katz, 1998). There are several differences between them due to the teachers' role, classroom educational environments, roles of families, as well as the assessment and evaluation of the children (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Hewett, 2001; Nuhoglu, 2013; Vecchi, 2010). These new approaches impact public and professional communities that look to impact on their young children. The Reggio Emilia Approach may be the most innovative, high-quality education system for infant-toddler and pre-primary levels in the world (New, 1990). Therefore, this article explores the history of Reggio Emilia Approach in Italy. Then provides an overview of the qualitative study of the Winter Institute Conference held in Reggio Emilia by giving details of the school visits and the conference from the researchers who were active participants. The researchers' thoughts on the Reggio Emilia Approach and how it could be incorporated into the United States and Turkey conclude the article.

### History of Reggio Emilia

On April 25th of 1945, Italy was liberated from the Nazi regime (Barazzoni, 2005). The city of Villa Cella in the via Emilia was in disarray as most cities in Europe at the time were. The Committee of National Liberation disbursed funds to cities in Italy to help rebuild the demolished cities. After rebuilding the city, Villa Cella still had some funds left and had a meeting to decide what to do with the remaining funds. It is said that the men of the city favored building a theater as many other cities were doing. The women of the city however, proposed building a preschool in hopes of helping the working class children get an equal education as those who were more privileged (Barazzoni, 2005). After much discussion and a vote, the preschool was decided on. During the work week, women would take mortar off of the bricks from the previously demolished buildings and got them ready for the men to use to create the school in the evening and on the weekends. After months of hard work, XXV Aprile the People's Nursery School of Villa Cella opened on the 13th of January in 1947 to its first 30 students (Barazzoni, 2005). Through the years the school has had gone through a lot. It has closed and reopened and has gone through renovations (Barazzoni, 2005).

While the citizens of Villa Cella was building their preschool, a man named Loris Malaguzzi heard of the news that the citizens were building a preschool. Being an elementary school teacher, Loris Malaguzzi was amazed that the citizens choose to build a school and he was in disbelief of this actually being true (Edwards, Gandini, & Formen, 2012). He then decided to investigate for himself and rode his bike to the city of Villa Cella and discovered for himself that this news was true (Edwards, Gandini, & Formen, 2012). He was inspired by the citizens and that they, as a collective, felt the need to educate their young citizens. This had a great impact on him and he continued to follow a path that would lead him back to the community in his future endeavors with education (Edwards, Gandini, & Formen, 2012). This is an important part of the Reggio Emilia Approach and on its history, as Loris Malaguzzi had a large impact on the educational aspects of the approach.

Reggio Emilia wasn't the only city to build a preschool, other cities across Italy began building preschools as well. Several preschools were around for many years but others were unable to continue funding schools and many of them began to close down. While this was going on, Loris Malaguzzi had been teaching at a middle school and was ready for a change of pace

from the state run schools. He then moved to Reggio Emilia and began a mental health clinic for people with special needs (Edwards, Gandini, & Formen, 2012). In the evenings he would go to the local schools that the citizens had built and started to help there. In 1963, with the help of Loris Malaguzzi, citizen parents and other citizen stakeholders, the first municipal preschool was opened (Edwards, Gandini, & Formen, 2012). A municipal preschool in Italy is a free school with an all-day program (Edwards, Gandini, & Formen, 2012). The first school was called Robinson. Within three years of its opening it burned to the ground in a fire. The town was saddened but the school was rebuilt and many schools followed in its footsteps (Edwards, Gandini, & Formen, 2012).

With the help of Loris Malaguzzi's educational philosophies, teachers, parents, children and the community have been able to make an educational approach that rivals those that have been around much longer. The core of the approach is that children are humans and they deserve the right to be educated in a more natural and caring environment (Barazzoni, 2005). The teachers and children are considered researchers in a quest for knowledge. The role of teachers in this approach is responsibility for forming a circular relationship with parents, children and other stakeholders who take care of the children's development (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). Topics are discussed and explored together with teachers and students. The parents have a committee and meet often with the schools. Many topics are discussed at meetings and the local community is often involved with these meetings as well as in other school functions. Looking at children as researchers instead of people that need knowledge bestowed on them is very important to the Reggio Emilia Approach (Barazzoni, 2005). Researchers stated that there are several curriculum formats on Reggio Emilia education approach such as teacher directed curriculum, emergent curriculum, and negotiated curriculum (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). Each style of these curriculum have its own plans which help children develop skills.

Edwards and Gandini (2018) state that the Reggio Emilia Approach is not a teaching model, curriculum, or method. They suggest that to understand this unique approach, firstly its historical and sociocultural perspectives must be explored by teachers and other who take care of and teach children. Which is why, the approach is not stagnant, it continues to grow and evolve just as children do. In today's society of technology, the Reggio Approach has embraced this evolution and has incorporated nature and technology in practical ways. The use of computers, webcams, and other technologies are fostering further learning alongside natural materials and recycled materials. Therefore authors stated that the Reggio Emilia Approach gives the best early childhood education in Italy (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; Rinaldi, 2004). Similarly, Katz (1998) stated that young children had impressive opportunities for learning through extended depth investigations in the Reggio Emilia approach. Moreover, preschool and primary schools that utilize the Reggio Emilia Approach give more chances for their students to achieve long term learning through exploration and discovery.

### **Assessment in the Reggio Emilia Approach**

Assessment within the Reggio Emilia approach looks and feels different than in traditional schools. In typical classrooms, each individual child is assessed. However, within the Reggio Emilia Approach, it's not just about the individual child but also about the group of students. This is to improve the children's sense of community and their use of cooperative learning. This means that due to the nature of the Reggio Emilia Approach, assessment looks very different when compared to typical educational approaches. There are no formal scores, ratings, or grades. Instead, teachers use documentation of students to show growth as within life experiences and real life situations to explore the children's schema, feelings, interests, dispositions, and capabilities (Katz, 1998). This means that teachers have extensive notes on the students, photographs, recordings, and of course students work (Katz & Chard, 1996). Children's experiences, memories, thoughts, and ideas all need to be well documented within the Reggio

Emilia Approach. Katz and Chad (1996) state that there are at least six ways to have high-quality documentation within the Reggio Emilia Approach. They are 1) enhancement of children's learning, 2) taking children's work and ideas seriously, 3) teacher planning and evaluation with children, 4) parent appreciation and participation, 5) teacher research and process awareness, and 6) children's learning made visible. Katz and Chad (1996) noted that there has to be high quality projects for the students so that the teachers are able to properly use these six ways of having quality assessment.

### **Research Methods**

The researchers used the qualitative method of participant observation for this study (Fetterman, 1998; Jorgensen, 1989). This method places the researchers as active participants within the social setting of the conference and the school tours (Gold, 1957). The researchers kept field notes by observing the culture of Reggio Emilia and the schools, the setting of the conference and the schools, as well as the social situations of the conference and schools (Burgess, 2003). The next section of the article explores the Winter Institute Conference and the school visits that the researchers attended.

### **Reggio Emilia Winter Institute of 2013**

The Reggio Children held their Winter Institute of 2013 in Reggio Emilia, Italy from the 17th of February to the 22nd of February. The theme of the conference was "0-99 Continuity in a Qualified System of Relationships." Our interpretation of the conference was that the Reggio Emilia Approach needs to continue beyond infant/toddler centers and preschools. They have been implemented the Reggio Approach in primary schools and they have been working out kinks that they have been struggle with. Many schools are unsure as to how to implement this into their classes and their schools. Reggio Children has been working hard with the teachers, families and children to make the primary schools just as successful as the infant/toddler centers and the preschools. Infant/toddler schools and preschools have regular meetings with the primary schools to help make the transition from traditional teaching to the Reggio Approach. Beyond primary schools, they would like to make the Reggio Emilia Approach continue all the way to the University level.

The week at the conference consisted of lectures, demonstrations, videos, and visits to schools. The topics revolved around continuity and the efforts that were being made to make transitions from one school to the next easier and smoother for the students. Demonstrations of the Reggio Approach were made by schools in Sweden, the United States, and Argentina. Seeing the Reggio Emilia Approach being adapted in other countries was a wonderful experience. The Reggio Emilia Approach has been named an approach and not a theory because it is believed that it is ever evolving and needs adaptations to each community. No two communities are identical and so no two approaches can be identical.



Picture 1. The researchers took this picture at the Reggio Emilia, Italy train station.

### **Visits to Reggio Emilia Schools**

While in Reggio Emilia, researcher one (R1) had the unique opportunity to visit four schools. This included visits to one infant/toddler center, two preschools and one primary school. All of the schools have the Reggio Emilia Approach and all of the schools had their own “cultural identity.” The cultural identity is a term that Loris Malaguzzi coined to describe how the school functions and is viewed within the context of the community.

The first school that R1 visited was an infant/toddler center called Maramotto. This school serves children from birth to thirty-six months old. It was built in 2008. The architect of the school was present as well as the interior designer. The school was made of an upstairs and a downstairs. The upstairs rooms were mostly used as the sleeping quarters for the children’s naps. There was also one atelier upstairs, as well as the facilities offices. There was a classroom for each age group as well. The teachers that are placed with the children when they are infants stay with the children until they leave the school at thirty-six months of age.



Picture 2. The researchers took this picture outside of one of the preschools. This shows some of the natural elements of the playground.

We got to speak with the teachers through an interpreter and most of the teachers, staff and cooks have been with the schools since its opening. R1 did notice that all of the teachers were of a young age. They were all very passionate about working with the children and seemed to enjoy discussing their work. There were not any children at the school at the time of our visit so it was also quite difficult to understand how some of the rooms functioned. The rooms were also set up in a way for us to view, but this too was confusing because it did not seem that it was a functioning space. Unfortunately, the researchers and other conference participants were told by all of the schools that pictures were not allowed to be taken within the schools.

The outside area consisted of a large field. Each classroom had an “outside classroom” that was a moveable platform that had a roof but no walls. They were all decorated differently with lovely trinkets that were colorful. The teachers showed their plans of a natural playground that is in the process of being built and should be completed by late spring or early summer. It had lovely elements, but for the most part it was not what thought of as a Reggio School.

The second school that researcher two visited was a primary school called Morante Primary School. The school serves children from six years old to fourteen years old. The school has three classrooms with 11 teachers. It runs on an 11 am to 1 pm, Monday to Friday schedule. Each classroom is a multi-subject teaching classroom. We had the opportunity to first walk around the school and observe the different classrooms. There weren't any children in the school since it was an afternoon visit but we were able to look at the classroom set up and the work on the walls. At first glance the school seemed like any other elementary school that seen in the United States but looking at the type of work the students did it was easy to see that the student work was in a more Reggio style than at first glance.



Picture 3. The researchers took this picture while on a tour of the city. This is one of the town squares where you can see people strolling and some children playing with the birds.

After walking around, the teachers showed a power point presentation that they had prepared for a joint project of the second and fourth grade students called “Scrapbooks.” They showed that the second grade class had gone on a field trip to a local park. The teachers had given the students each a notebook to do as they please with it. Some students wrote detailed accounts of what they saw, some drew pictures, while others drew or wrote whatever they felt like. A few months after a few months the teachers introduced the notebooks to the fourth grade class. They had the challenge of figuring out what the other students had done. They worked in groups and they each came up with different ideas. Some corrected the work some made copies and put the pictures together, while some didn’t have a clue and worked with other students.

When they had finished with the notebooks they handed them back to the second graders. The second graders then looked at what the fourth graders thought they had done and then wrote in the books to tell the fourth graders what they had gotten wrong. After this the second graders also gave the fourth graders the hint of which park they had visited. The fourth graders then got the notebooks back and were able to figure out that the second graders were on a nature trip to the park.

The third school that R1 had visited was definitely the defining moment of week. From the outside of the school, the Robinson school looks very ordinary. Once inside however, a feeling of comfort and warmth was wrapped around. The school had specific lighting to allow the feeling of warmth and many windows to allow for lots of natural light to flow into the building. The walls had cool, warm colors on them and the furniture was in great condition. Visitors were first welcomed into the atelierista’s room and were given the background on the school. Visitors learned that it was the first municipal preschool in Reggio. The role of the Atelierista is giving specialized training in the visual arts at Reggio Emilia schools (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). Instead of atelierista, teacher plays a n important role in this approach (Edwards, 1998). Teacher seen as coach and serve several sources and guide to their children for improving their cognitive, socio-emotional, physical and language skills (Rinaldi, 2001).

The children were there as it was in the morning and coming out of the atelier. R1 and R2 could see children working with the cooks to make part of their lunch. In the hallway there was a wonderful small corner for a dramatic play center. Each classroom was filled with color and cheerfulness. The teachers were at ease and the children were engaged in different activities. Researchers thought it was very interesting how the children were allowed to walk around the entire building without their shoes on. In front of each classroom were rows of children's shoes. Most teachers didn't have shoes on either.

R1 entered the atelier of one of the classrooms and joined by one of the other attendees of the conference. Visitors were chatted for a few minutes trying to figure out what the current project in the room was since it consisted of water and lights. As we were chatting a boy came in and started talking as Italian. After a few minutes a teacher came in and set up a webcam for the boy to explore some of the other materials in the room. The teacher left and came back with two girls and the three of them looked at bags, paper and other materials with the webcam. They smelled some of the materials and were truly investigating them.

When visitors were finished looking at the classrooms, they were invited back to the atelier. At this point many children were welcomed into the room and then something very special happened. One of the women was part of the Reggio Network in Israel and had brought a present for the school since it was there fiftieth anniversary. She spoke slowly in Italian to tell the child that she had brought them a present. The women then gave a box to them that contained blocks with children's faces at the school in Israel. Everyone was quite moved and the children were very excited. The children left and we then left the school after asking a few questions.

The fourth school that R1 and R2 visited was school that Reggio Children had created on their property. This had two levels but was much like the Robinson school. It was warm and inviting. There weren't any children there because researchers visited in the afternoon. They were allowed to walk around the school and explore the different classrooms. This was a unique opportunity that will have lasting memories.

### **Conclusion of Journey into the Reggio Emilia Approach**

Overall the conference was an exceptional learning experience for the researchers. The researchers felt the visits to the schools were imperative to the conference and the research. The school visits truly gave an inside look into the Reggio Emilia Approach. The researchers have reflected and thought about how this educational approach could be incorporated into the United States' educational system and the Turkish Educational system. A lot would have to change in the educational system in the United States and in the educational policies within the United States in order for the schools to be more creative and to have a different way of thinking with an emphasis on not just the individual students' scores.

The rich history of Reggio Emilia, Italy has led to the unique educational system they have created. The opportunity of the visiting some Reggio Emilia Approach schools in Italy has shown new strategies and teaching ideas that can be used in new education system by adopting some of the Reggio Emilia approaches to the researchers. Moreover, it can be suggested that, teacher education programs could support their academicians for this type of journey to improve their knowledge about new education approaches such as the Reggio Emilia Approach. Reggio Emilia, Italy is truly a special place with a rich history which has led the city to have a unique approach to teaching young children.



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