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# Finding our way:

## *Interpreting Reggio in a New Zealand context*

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### **Introduction**

**T**he early childhood education system of the Italian city Reggio Emilia has had a strong impact on early childhood educators around the world. There are a number of elements of the Reggio approach that are seen as providing inspiration for international early childhood educators.

The image of the child as rich in experiences, capable and competent is a fundamental part of the Reggio philosophy (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). There is no fixed curriculum. The programme emerges from children's interests and is developed through an ongoing negotiation involving teachers, children and parents. The terms *project* and *progettazione* are used to describe the small-group, long-term investigations that result (Rinaldi, 2006). Topics for projects may come from teachers or the children (Millikan, 2003). Documentation is seen as an integral part of learning and teaching processes in Reggio early childhood centres. It is used not only to chart the course of a project, but also as a tool for reflection and planning involving teachers, children and parents (Rinaldi, 2001). The teaching approaches that have been developed in Reggio early childhood centres have been characterised as a pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2001). Another feature of the Reggio approach is the emphasis placed on providing children with the widest range of materials and media with which to express their ideas and outcomes (Malaguzzi, 1998). The Reggio approach is particularly characterised by a holistic approach to curriculum and deep

relations with parents and the wider community (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

The Reggio philosophy and pedagogy is unique to its own cultural setting and cannot be transplanted into other contexts. Early childhood educators outside Italy have been exploring ways in which to incorporate the spirit of Reggio practice into their own contexts (Cadwell, 2003; Fu, Stremmel, & Hill, 2002; Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005; Lewin-Benham, 2006; Millikan, 2003; Thornton & Brunton, 2007; Wurm, 2005).

There is a strong movement encompassing a project approach in the United States (Chard, 1999; Hartman & Eckerty, 1995; Helm & Katz, 2001; Owen, 2007; Sloane, 1999), but this appears to be a much more structured, teacher-directed approach than that found in Reggio Emilia. As Rinaldi (2006, p. 132) explains:

The word 'project' evokes the idea of a dynamic process, an itinerary. It is sensitive to the rhythms of communication and incorporates the significance and timing of children's investigation and research. The duration of a project can thus be short, medium or long, continuous or discontinuous, with pauses, suspensions, and restarts.

Although a number of early education centres in New Zealand are working to incorporate the Reggio approach to projects in their own practice, very little research-based literature has resulted from these experiences. This article goes some way to meeting this gap in the literature and provides a starting point for investigation

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of how the Reggio philosophy and practice are being interpreted and integrated into New Zealand contexts.

## Methods

The aim of the research was to explore the relationship between the pedagogy of teachers who had been influenced by the early childhood programme of the Italian city of Reggio Emilia, particularly with regard to projects, and the learning experiences and outcomes for the children involved in the project. The nature of the research question indicated the use of a qualitative, ethnographic method. As a process, ethnography involves prolonged observation of a group, typically through participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people or through one-on-one interviews with members of the group (Creswell, 2007). The nature of the participants and the context of the study also suggested an ethnographic approach. The children were quite young, aged four years at the beginning of the study, and it was important that I earn the children's trust and become accepted by them as part of the normal early childhood setting. The teachers also had a strong voice in the process. They have played the major part in setting the research question, and were actively involved in data collection and the data analysis process.

The initial stage of the research was interviews I held with the teachers to identify and document the Reggio influences that they believed underpinned and directed the project work they carried out with the children. Then I documented a project that emerged from a child bringing a packet of money to the centre, using field notes, photographs, copies of teacher planning and documentation of learning experiences related to the project, and informal discussions with the teachers about their intentions and actions. This project ran from February to July 2009. The teachers participated in an hour-long interview at the end of the project to discuss the initial findings.

## Setting and participants

The research was carried out in the morning session of a very multicultural Auckland kindergarten. I chose this kindergarten because it had a reputation for the quality of the project work that occurred in it. Many early childhood educators had visited the kindergarten to observe and learn about their work. The

participants were the three teachers and 23 of the 45 children who attended the session. All the teachers were qualified early childhood education teachers and had between seven and nine years' early childhood teaching experience.

Of the 87 children on the roll, 59 had English as an additional language. Seventeen of the 59 had no English at all and the other 42 were at the level of being able to use simple greetings in English. The children came from 14 different ethnic groups, and 40 Indian children were the largest representation from a single ethnic group (Education Review Office, 2009). The kindergarten was sited in a low socioeconomic area and received equity funding as a result.

## Ethical considerations

The research had ethical approval from The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Research with young children poses a number of important ethical issues that need to be addressed. Although the children were not able to give fully informed consent, which I obtained from the parent/caregiver, I took care to explain to the children in terms that they could understand what was being observed and to make clear that they could ask not to be observed at any time. I also looked for nonverbal indications that children were withdrawing their consent. As only half of the children had consents signed by their parents, I needed to be careful that nonparticipants were not included in any photographs and their actions and comments were not included in field notes.

I also had to consider the power relationship I had with the teachers. There was always the chance that the teachers might feel uncomfortable and pressured to perform, as their pedagogy was being documented and analysed.

## Findings

The project began when a child brought a red money packet from the Chinese New Year celebration for the Year of the Ox. Interest in cows emerged as the Indian children made a connection with the place of the cow in their own culture. The teachers used a video of Sarah's father's cows to check the children's interest, and used the children's lack of knowledge and interest in where milk came from to establish some initial areas of inquiry.

During the next four months a project developed from this first interest. The children

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began by painting cows and making cow sculptures that included udders and ear tags. A model farm was set up inside along with a farm area in the playground, and the painting table was also focused on cowhide paintings using sponges and black paint. Some examples were available for the children to model. Sarah brought some cartoon pictures of cows, and the children used these as models for drawing and making wall plaques using a découpage technique. This drawing activity was a consistent feature of the whole project and at times was widened into a literacy activity as children wrote animal words using flash cards onto their painting, the teacher helping the children form their letters and write the words.

Teacher-led discussion looked at where milk comes from, and its different forms, using a yoghurt pot, milk carton, cream bottle and stuffed animals to illustrate the place of milk in their daily lives. There was also reference to the production route from farm to tanker to factory to shop. The teachers read the book *Old MacDonald Had a Farm* (Daniel & Daniel, 1992) and used the stuffed animals to illustrate the animals in the book. Some children were uncertain about wool coming from sheep, so the teachers found some wool to give them a visual and tactile experience of it.

The teachers and parents provided a lot of stimulus material around the centre related to cows and farms. The role of the parents was quite significant in providing resources for this project (DVDs, file cards, books and pictures, test tubes, headwear, badges etc.). One parent brought in a sheep dog for the children to see, ask questions about and pat.

Sally obtained a DVD from Fonterra (the largest dairy company in New Zealand) showing the process from the farm to the carton, and this led to Mary setting up a “dairy factory” with the children, consisting of a funnel and a number of cardboard tubes. The children were involved in making and testing the “milk” produced by their factory. The next week Sally’s nephew, who worked for Fonterra, came into the kindergarten and talked about the milk factory DVD and showed them how they test the milk. After his talk Mary set up a reasonably complex water channel system outside that mirrored the imaginary cardboard tube factory she had set up inside the week before. The children used a variety of test tubes, funnels, measuring cups and buckets to move the water around the channel system and into bottles. They “tested” the milk and wrote the results up. The water-

trough-based factory became a daily activity for the next two weeks.

The kindergarten organised a farm visit. This was a novel experience for both children and parents, as most of them had never been on a farm before. The visit provided a raft of hands-on experiences for the children. They were able to milk a cow, watch a cow being machine milked, feed the calves, watch a sheep being shorn and bring the fleece back to the kindergarten, and also hold rabbits and bantam hens. The children had done a brainstorm before the visit about what they expected to see on the farm and were able to identify many of these things as they walked up the long drive to the farm buildings. On their return the children were interested in drawing the animals and writing their names. The feeding system for the calves had been a particular interest, so the teachers and children made one of their own in the farm area. In the outdoor farm the children would pretend to milk the wooden model of the cow that had a rubber glove for teats, and then carry the bucket of milk over to the feeding system.

Mary found an article about the LEARNZ Virtual Field Trips. LEARNZ ([www.learnz.org.nz](http://www.learnz.org.nz)) is an online education programme for students in New Zealand state, private and integrated schools that offers virtual field trip experiences. Students’ participation is supported by online background materials and activities, and is enabled using live audio conferencing, web board and diaries, images and videos uploaded daily. The resources supporting over 140 field trips are freely available to all registered New Zealand teachers. When Mary visited the LEARNZ site she found four one-minute clips from a past farm virtual field trip, and downloaded these onto laptops for the children to access. The website was also accessed for the children, and, in Mary’s words:

... it actually showed what they did in a processing plant so the children had more of an idea than that sort of evolved their play. We brought out the old printer and that became like the machine that tested the milk . . . they’d push the buttons on the side, wait a while and then they’d say ‘yes’; they had two tables set up, one was the office and the other was the laboratory, and they’d call out to the girls what the readings were and which colour milk it was. (Interview, 19 June 2009)

Literacy- and arts-related activities continued to be an integral part of the project. The teachers

bought books such as *Cows in the Kitchen* (Crebbin, 1998) and *The Cow That Went Oink* (Most, 2003) to read at group time, and used a song from one of the books as a stimulus for the children to dance and drum to.

The children’s interest continued into the second term when it commenced at the end of April, despite the two-week break in the project work. New directions were now being taken. The children were now more interested in the farm rather than cows as such. One child, looking at the picture of a cow underneath a palm tree on a cartoon print brought into the centre, made a connection with his own Pasifika culture. He brought to the kindergarten a coconut that had recently arrived from Tonga for his family, and the children all had a chance to taste the coconut milk and eat the white flesh. This created a new interest in what farms grow, and wider uses of milk. The children made their own butter and used the butter by-product (buttermilk) to make scones that they shared for lunch. Interest in the milk factory continued, and in the middle of June the children were still asking for the teachers to set it up for them. As the third term began at the end of July, the project took a new direction. While involved in a group reading of the book *Cows* (Doyle & Rinaldi, 2002), one of the children pointed out the stars in the picture and linked it to Matariki, the Māori New Year celebration. A search for books on Matariki led to a visit from the local public librarian and a new focus on libraries and book making.

## Discussion

Many aspects of the Reggio approach to projects can be seen within this project in the kindergarten. The children’s interests provided the starting point for the project. Sarah describes how they used resources such as photos and the video of her father’s cows to establish some beginning questions for the project:

We talked about milk and a lot of them didn’t know that milk came from cows. So you could see them sort of processing that. And a couple of days later we’re looking at a photo of one of my dad’s cows drinking out of a water trough and I said ‘What do you think is in the water trough?’, and some of the children said ‘milk’. Others said ‘water’. And we talked about some of the different things that you can make out of milk, like milkshakes and yoghurt. So we may end up exploring that. (Interview, 13 February 2009)

Throughout the project the kindergarten also explored the interests of the children by regular brainstorm sessions held with both the whole group and small groups. The children's ideas were documented on large charts that were then used as a starting point in teacher planning meetings. The teachers looked to exploit opportunities to make links between the learning experiences in the project and the children's home culture. The exploration of where milk came from was linked to a festival that celebrated Krishna's birthday. Krishna's childhood was spent flirting with milkmaids and stealing butter kept beyond his reach by his parents. The festival of Dahi Handi celebrates the god's playful and mischievous side, where teams of young men form human pyramids to reach a high-hanging pot of butter and break it. The children made their own human pyramid as they acted out the Krishna story and used saris donated by parents to create a dance of the sacred cow. A Māori child's reference to the festival of Matariki during the reading of a project-related book was taken on board by the teachers and became the starting point of the next long-term project.

The teachers did feel that their planning was focused on the children's interests and that they were responsive to changes in interest:

We sort of talk about it and then it will evolve but we don't know what it will evolve into. So we might say 'Oh, tomorrow we might be able to put out the milk factory', but you never know if they will be interested in it. If they turn their interest to something else we have to put something else to sustain their interest. (Sarah, interview, 19 June 2009)

An element of pedagogical practice that differed from the documentation/assessment practice in most New Zealand early childhood centres, but which reflected the influence of Reggio Emilia on this teaching team, was the complete focus on group documentation and the prominence of this on display for parents and children to view and respond to. The documentation visible around the centre was an important element in maintaining children's interest in the project, and allowing them to revisit and reflect on their learning experiences. By the end of March, seven weeks into the project, there were 29 different Learning Stories related to the project on display in the kindergarten. This belief in the appropriateness of group documentation for project work caused some concern to the

Education Review Office when they carried out their audit in June. The Education Review Office made it clear that they would prefer a greater focus on producing individual Learning Stories (Education Review Office, 2009), but the teachers feel this is difficult to achieve without undermining the integrity of a Reggio-inspired approach to documenting projects (Group interview, 19 June 2009). The teachers were able to articulate the benefits of their documentation practice in terms reminiscent of Reggio practice:

And with the three of us doing documenting we can often pick up a different aspect, you know, we've seen through our eyes what's there, and I think that's the beauty of putting it out here like this—it's not only the children revisit it but we as ourselves, as adults, do and look and see what somebody's captured; and parents can look and see as well. That is open to all parents, whereas each book is only open to the child's parent. But I find [it] interesting to see what others have written and just see what they, you know, where they saw it. (Mary, interview, 19 June 2009)

A key element of the Reggio approach is the high involvement of the parents and community in the children's learning experiences, and this was also evident in this kindergarten. During the project examined by the research, there was clear evidence of close ties between the kindergarten and the parents and local community. The way in which the project was related to significant cultural occasions that the children and their families were participating in also strengthened the ties with the parents and wider community. It was a parent who made the link between the children's interest in where milk came from and the Indian festival of Krishna's birthday. The parents were proactive in providing resources for the project. There was a continual stream of photographs and books from home, and the model factory benefited from the bottles and measuring cups, test tubes, filing cards and work badges provided for it. Parents also took time to read the documentation on display and to talk with their children about what they were doing. This parental interest helped maintain the children's interest.

The Reggio focus on the "hundred languages of children" (Malaguzzi, 1998) was echoed in the kindergarten as the children were able to express their understanding and explore their

developing ideas in a range of media and literary genres. The children worked with paint, clay, ceramic tiles and a wide range of collage materials. They created and performed their own music, dances and plays, and designed and produced model farms inside the building and a mock farm in the outside play area. Literary activities included being read to, making up their own stories, making name and work title badges and simulating the recording of test results.

One area of dissonance with Reggio practice was the amount of teacher direction of the activities. Although in Reggio the teachers play a central role in the planning and evaluating of the children's investigations, the children themselves have a great deal of independence and control in how they conduct the investigation (Rinaldi, 2006). Although the learning experiences were clearly linked to children's questions, the research showed that the kindergarten teachers had a big role in setting up and directing them. The teachers were not aware of how highly they directed the actions of the children in some of the activities they set up. In an interview after initial reporting back of findings, Mary said:

I wasn't aware that we were considered teacher directed, it wasn't until sort of reading your report and listening to E[ducation] R[eview] O[ffice], I always thought of us as more sort of running with the children's ideas. So that's been quite an eye opener—so I guess it's subconscious, that we don't really think about it. (Interview, 19 June 2009)

The teachers felt that this more directive pedagogical approach was appropriate for their particular group of children. Although the teachers would have preferred a more facilitative and supportive role, they felt the lack of English of many of the children necessitated them providing the children with the language so that they could understand what the equipment, stories, songs and actions were about.

## Conclusion

The research focused on how influences from Reggio Emilia have been interpreted in the practice in one New Zealand early childhood setting. Although the high degree of teacher direction would appear to be more closely aligned to the project approach in the United States (Helm & Katz, 2001) than the *progettazione* process of Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2006), a number of the pedagogical practices do seem to have alignment with Reggio practices.

There is a strong partnership with the families and wider community that has been developed over a number of years and over different projects. The emphasis on highly visible group documentation of learning enhances this partnership and is based on Reggio pedagogical documentation practices. There is a strong commitment to group collaborative learning in the kindergarten, and the children are seen as active agents and co-researchers in the planning and learning that takes place. Great pains are taken to provide provocations within the environment that encourage the children to independently engage with the themes of the projects.

There is an increasing number of New Zealand early childhood educators who are working to find ways of interpreting the practices of Reggio Emilia in an authentic manner within their own particular context. The case study described in this article has shown both some of the possibilities and some of the challenges of implementing a Reggio-inspired curriculum. Although there is an increasingly rich literature describing this process in the United States (see, for example, Cadwell, 2003; Lewin-Benham, 2006), the United Kingdom (see, for example, Kinney & Wharton, 2008) and Australia (see, for example, Millikan, 2003), little has been written about and for New Zealand educators, and much research still needs to be done to document this trend.

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