

Encounters with Reggio Emilia – thoughts and reflections from Dianne Akast



The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education has intrigued, inspired and provoked my thinking for many years now but nothing can compare to the reality of participating with more than three hundred educators from around the world in a weeklong series of encounters with the city of Reggio Emilia, its citizens and educational approach.

So...how to contextualise this experience in meaningful ways for those who will read this?

I start with the wonderment of being in this ancient city whose origins date back to before Roman times. This is a city which commemorates the struggles of those who fought against fascism and which embraces socialist and democratic principles. A city where statuesque shuttered buildings with enormous arched entrances enclose narrow cobbled streets; where cars share the one way routes through the city with numerous cyclists but also with pedestrians and café seating which spills out onto the road; where most businesses close at 1:00 pm for siesta and don't reopen till after 4:00...but then remain open till 7:00; where one of the hotels stayed in by our group used to be a palace and has beautiful frescos adorning the conference room; where the Duomo with its beautiful statues of the cities patron saints stands as a reminder of the huge influence of the Roman Catholic church on Italian society and the education system; where piazzas provide communal spaces for the city markets and for people to gather in the evening to enjoy good food, wine and conversation.

It is impossible to forget that it is out of this history that the commitment of the Municipality of Regio Emilia towards innovative and forward thinking early childhood education grew.



After three days exploring the city and other parts of Italy (Venicia, Firenze, Bologna), the study group started in earnest on Sunday afternoon. Most fittingly it began at Ariosto Theatre where the famous curtain (ring of transformations) created by the children from Diana Preschool hangs. A tour around the central city, hosted by volunteers – Friends of Reggio Children – familiarised us with some of the key landmarks and advice about local delicacies to try during our stay (e.g. tortelli zucci and capaletti). Viewing this

curtain, so lovingly presented to the world, and hearing the fondness with which the volunteers speak of the city and the work of Reggio Children, really cements an understanding of the value placed on the relationship which exists between the Municipality and the centres it funds.

What followed was five days where the pedagogistas, atelieristas and teachers invited us into their early childhood centres and shared with us the playfulness, creativity and depth of thinking which is woven throughout each progettazione proposed to the children. Listening to passionate educators describe how these projects unfolded, gave a real sense of the value placed on an unhurried approach where reciprocal relationships and listening “with all our senses” (Rinaldi, 2005) to the voices and theories of children are viewed as key to potentialising the learning and the lives of these very youngest of citizens.

These educators emphasise the joy of being a learner. They do not speak of planning but instead talk of predicting, imagining, proposing and re-launching children's interests. They advocate against narrow, individualistic, predetermined learning outcomes choosing instead to focus on researching and co-constructing the culture of childhood through dialogue and embracing diverse perspectives.



They propose the right of children to learn in collaborative and creative ways, where their voices are not only heard but made visible throughout their city and across the world.

I was lucky enough to have been chosen to visit scuola Diana (right in the heart of Reggio Emilia) and nido-scuola Nilde Iotti-Agorà - a Municipality Infant and Toddler centre and a preschool operated by a parent co-operative both housed in an amazing building designed to interpret the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia approach. These visits revealed environments which contained both familiar and unfamiliar resources and ways of being. I was initially taken by the simplicity of the furnishings in juxtaposition with the complexity of thought which has gone in to presenting every day and “junk” materials in sensitive yet provocative ways. While I was expecting the extensive use of clay, wire and other art materials as tools for discovery and representation, the reverence shown towards natural materials and those gathered from the ReMida centre was something which made me reflect deeply on the value we place on these materials back home in Aotearoa New Zealand. Technology, too, was used in innovative ways to create for children different perspectives and ways of viewing the world. In these classrooms even the curiosity of the youngest children is aroused not just through the use of the light boxes with which we are very familiar, but through access to a range of projectors, computers, webcams and microscopes.

Jerome Bruner states “Knowing where you are, where you find yourself, helps you develop a sense of your own identity and your place in the world...Every place has its own spirit, its own past and its own aspirations”. Time spent in Reggio Emilia gives good cause to reflect on our own unique history and to really critique what we as educators and citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand truly value and why. Do we always approach our work with love and an inquiring mind? What do we really mean when we propose a view of children as competent, capable bearers of rights?