

Study Group Tour to Italy - April 2019

The group

Diti Hill-Denee and Anne Meade were the group leaders. Each had hosted a pre-tour gathering in their home cities a couple of weeks before departure. Diti and Anne shared the questions and helpful tips that came up with all participants by email. These meetings set a positive tone from the outset, and those who met together made a commitment to be inclusive of all those joining in Italy.

Anne met four participants at Milan Malpensa airport (in fact Meg Moss found Anne in the other half of the terminal) and we met more participants at Milano Centrale Station. All elected to take the slow train to see the country. Some decided to walk from the station to Hotel Posta on arrival! Diti and Rachel Denee met one participant in Bologna and accompanied her to Reggio Emilia.

There were 23 participants from New Zealand in the REANZ study group, including the two group leaders and three partners. The large majority were from Auckland, with a further five from Wellington, one from Christchurch and one from Kaikohe. A majority were teachers or managers in ECE centres; there were two school principals (and their husbands) and two teachers from Mt Richmond Special School.



Most of the group had registered for the additional excursions to Florence, Venice and the Cervi museum. The 'ten day' group bonded from the outset and, at the same time, were thoughtful and inclusive of those who arrived on the Sunday (the 'seven-day' group). During the 5 days of the study group we met as a whole group daily to discuss reflections on and questions from the day, either in the meeting room at La Posta or in a corner of the Loris Malaguzzi Centre.

The excursions

The excursions worked very well with only minor hitches: some rain in Florence and a missed connection in Bologna returning from Venice (too few minutes to move between platforms in a huge railway hub). For both day-long excursions, most in the group elected to walk the streets and bridges and view the churches, museums and sculptures together, as one group of 10-12 people. Anne pre-booked

entry tickets on-line for the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which saved queue time for the two who accompanied her to the gallery.



The half-day visit to the Cervi museum was highly commended by all who went, which was everybody in the ten-day group. The bonus was an elderly member of the Cervi family (the daughter of one of Papa Alcide Cervi's daughters) came out of her apartment on site to talk to us when she heard we were visitors from NZ. The links between the 28th Māori Battalion and the Partisans at Cervi are strong.



The study tour

Excellent in every aspect!

The Sunday afternoon welcome by Paola Cagliari, and the 'anchor' pedagogista hosts/speakers for the week – Daniela Lanzi and Valentina Violi- hit the right spot. City dignitaries made the point that the whole of Reggio Emilia is engaged with the education project centred on the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre. We learned of plans to move the REMIDA Centre to the vicinity of the International Centre. Paola in her welcome showed us how many countries were represented by the 440 participants in the lecture hall.

The guided walks around the old city were, as always, informative and engaging.



The week's programme was more comprehensive and intense than Anne could recall from her first study tour in 2010, but as full as Diti remembered the 2017 and 2018 study tours to be. There is now no siesta break for participants to walk to the city centre; a buffet lunch is provided in the Loris Malaguzzi Centre, making it easier to visit the shop and the exhibitions during the 90 minutes between sessions. The days between Monday and Thursday did not end until 6.30pm. Thus, 2019 was more akin to the intensive course that REANZ trustees and others attended in 2016. It was of the same standard too. There were briefings by appropriate people before all visits to early childhood settings.

A feature that has been an integral part of the last two study tours was a two-hour hands-on experience in an atelier (in the Malaguzzi Centre), superbly demonstrating the 'environment as the third teacher', with atelieristas prompting us to explore/ play with rich materials. A one-hour slot was provided for us to self-organise into our country groups on Thursday. We made this our daily meeting and shared what each had experienced in the ateliers.

There have been some changes to the leadership approach. While Emanuela and Paola continue to oversee the organisation of the international study tours, others have stepped up to facilitate the programme. For example, Daniela wears several 'hats'. She is a pedagogista and was given the PD opportunity to work on our study group programme. She chaired most sessions with able assistance from Valentina (neophyte at the study tour). Daniela spends time in the documentation centre each week. Valentina is also a pedagogista and is the overall leader of provision for children with additional rights across the city (not just for centres and preschools under the auspices of Reggio Children). Such special projects and responsibilities, we were told, are regarded as professional learning opportunities.

Tour group leaders could choose where they visited. Diti and Anne made sure that they visited the Martiri di Sesso (Martyrs of Sesso) preschool together, as this is our designated REANZ centre. We had taken some gifts and Diti expressed a hope that a deeper relationship could be forged between the people in that preschool and REANZ. They in turn echoed this hope to the pedagogista (Marika), but no



tangible ideas were exchanged. Anne found this preschool of particular interest because it is a Centro Verde ('green school'), something akin to an Enviro-School in New Zealand. Daisies is an Enviro-School with silver status. Diti enjoyed talking to Else Bertani, niece of Bice Bertani, one of the woman activists, during and after the war, responsible for setting up schools for young children and, in particular, Martiri di Sesso. Else signed a copy of the book *Along the Levee Road*, the history of the school. Almost all documentation and the settings throughout the Martiri de Sesso preschool and outside area (with its orchard) showed strong links between their educational experience and their 'green' vision.

The closing session on Friday was to be focused entirely on music, facilitated by Filippo Chieli. This session was reduced considerably as Claudia Giudici had just returned from overseas and wished to deliver a formal lecture on the value of the Reggio educational approach in a time of unrest, war, and violence against innocent citizens. Her talk was moving, thought-provoking, strongly political and ethical and very sane, delivered like a true states(wo)man. Daniela, Claudia, Emanuela and Paola concluded the study tour, followed by farewells. The Aotearoa NZ group (including a small group from REP) sang a waiata, *Tutira mai nga iwi*, and Deborah Wansbrough gave Claudia a copy of *Te Whāriki*, signed by everyone.

Whilst some of the group went on a wine and excursion on the last (Friday night), others went looking for the annual International Photography Exhibition events in the old city, which opened that night on the piazza outside the Teatro Municipale. Our ears were assaulted by a public concert that accompanied the exhibition in the Piazza Prampolini from 9pm to 11pm! Only a short sleep was possible before taxis came to take us away to the four corners of the world on Saturday.

Extra-curricular activities

A majority of the group went to dinner together most nights. The early arrivals were treated to an excellent meal at the Kiwi-owned vegetarian restaurant, Story Kitchen, owned and managed by Nicky Murphy, before the tour proper started, and we all (23) returned there another



night. The choice of Il Pozzo on the Piazza di Teatro Ariosto for our REANZ-funded dinner was universally applauded: authentic atmosphere, great food and wonderful service.



The organisation of the cheese and wine excursions by Reggio Children was shared at a very late point in the week. Only a few of our group went and they loved the experience. The annual International Photography Exhibition began on the last Friday and a number of study tour participants took advantage of this. It was worth tracking down an opening exhibition on our final evening in the city, in the cathedral grounds on Via Emilia.

Ciao from Diti and Anne