

DEVELOPING CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH REGGIO EMILIA INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD

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Abstract

After the Second World War, Loris Malaguzzi led the development of the Reggio Emilia method in early childhood education in the city of Reggio Emilia. Reggio Emilia schools are now held up as role models for the development of young children's creativity. This article gives an overview of the Reggio Emilia method and looks at how it fits with the results of recent studies on how young children develop their creativity. The current research explored the impact of the Reggio Emilia method on preschoolers' innovative thinking talents. The study's goal was to investigate qualitatively what aspects of a school culture of creativity in Reggio Emilia-inspired schools relate to instructional procedures. The qualitative exploratory study technique was adopted to investigate and comprehend the perceived advantages of the Reggio Emilia approach via a thorough literature analysis. The results could lead to a change in early childhood teaching that combines aspects of the social constructivist approach that promotes children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, bringing about societal change. It was thus determined that the Reggio Emilia method of early childhood education provides a model for the growth of young children's creativity.

Keywords: Reggio Emilia, Creativity, Critical thinking, Preschoolers

Introduction

In recent years, the ability to think creatively and be creative has become crucial for coping with the world's accelerating change. Each person varies to a different extent in their levels of creativity. But it is also possible that creativity suppressed by elements like upbringing, academic background, and societal impositions. It may also be improved and sharpened with the use of specialist training methods. Creativity is referred to as being open to issues, disorders, and disharmony, recognising problems, looking for answers, making educated guesses, generating hypotheses about issues, or trying new ideas in the face of failure. Creativity is the process of gathering information, repurposing it, and reconfiguring it until it is delivered in a brand-new way. In a nutshell, creativity involves more than just coming up with an original idea; it also entails synthesising prior knowledge in order to create something new. It also entails discovering novel approaches to age-old problems, being

adaptable to new circumstances, and conceptualising the functional characteristics of everyday objects in novel ways.

Thanks to the growing recognition of the importance of creative thinking, there have been ample research efforts all over the globe into this area. These studies contrast the paradigms of standard and alternative training and came to the conclusion that alternative instruction has a more advantageous effect on the growth of creative thinking. In a 2003 research that combined conventional and experiential learning, Chang, Lee, Ng, and Moon found that students considered simulations to be beneficial for fostering creativity, teamwork, decision-making, planning, and management abilities. In a different research, Jasmine and Schiesl (2009) watched first-grade instructors as they worked with their pupils to enhance language fluency via the assiduous use of word walls as a teaching strategy. The instructors first concentrated on improving the pupils' fluency using the WW approach and provided the classroom with reference materials on a regular basis. Jasmine and Schiesl (2009) conducted a study on students in Class 1 in an effort to determine why the students had troubles developing their fluency skills and connecting with the reference materials. The study's findings showed that teachers must involve live student participation in their academic activities.

When Professors emphasise student engagement in class activities and then encourage them to work in groups, the students do well. The pupils gradually mastered word fluency and were better able to employ the words in class to construct sentences. The Reggio Emilia Approach is a philosophy that has deep roots in a postmodern and progressive worldview (Malaguzzi, 1998). This educational paradigm views learning as being actively and cooperatively generated by the student and the instructor as they engage in social and physical learning environments such as the classroom and school; it is democratic and participatory (Apple, 2008). Neither the Reggio Emilia method nor the linear educational paradigm are stagnant. It is not intended to be interpreted and applied as a formula. Teachers and educational philosophers who started, are still starting, and are sharing the work of Reggio Emilia schools in the spirit of inquiry and conversation have dubbed it a long-term "educational project." A method of seeing, hearing, speaking, being committed to connections that respect identity and culture, and being committed to discussion and action are all characteristics of Reggio-inspired teaching (Edward, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).

The Reggio Emilia Approach builds on and enhances children's innate abilities. through learning experiences and surroundings that help people develop their aesthetic sense and more

effectively express themselves via art forms including painting, music, theatre, and photography (Kim & Darling, 2009). Instead of attempting to impart the needed information in a didactic manner, the goal is to encourage the kid to use it as a tool during educational activities. Children get to experience learning via practice in this situation. For instance, in a painting class, the objective is to inspire the kid to produce a painting that will enable her to share with her friends her ideas on the events that day rather than instructing her to paint a predetermined item or concept.

An effective illustration of how instructors may collaborate with young children to co-create knowledge is provided by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. This philosophy places a high priority on collaborative connections characterised by discourse and communication as well as critical thinking processes that guide how meaning is produced from experience (Edwards et al., 1998). Students gain these abilities when they collaborate in groups to address issues, research issues, formulate ideas, and share what they have discovered. Reggio educators strive to record traces of what happens via thorough and continuing recording as well as a reflective procedure known as “revisiting” via educational experiences (Forman, 2005).

The Reggio Emilia method has its own distinct definition of curriculum and evaluation systems. The main focuses of this research were these educational processes, how they are carried out, and the culture of creativity present in a Reggio Emilia-inspired school that fosters interaction between them. This essay examines if using the Reggio Emilia techniques and model may support an efficient strategy for fostering the development of critical thinking abilities in young children. The study conceptualises and specifies the main Reggio Emilia techniques to this end.

Emilia offers a chance to comprehend several approaches to fostering original thought. We intend to systematise a pedagogical approach toward establishing a conceptual framework to facilitate the application of Reggio Emilia methodology at pre-school levels, leading to best practices in early childhood teaching and learning, via a thorough analysis of the literature.

Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia method is named for its birthplace in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia. Local families worked with Loris Malaguzzi, a lifelong educator, entrepreneur, and creative philosopher, to develop a distinctive public early childhood education system shortly after World War II. Due to the devastation caused by the war, Loris Malaguzzi and the parents of Reggio Emilia, Italy, felt that the way education was done needed to be altered fundamentally. A new educational philosophy built on the tenets of respect, responsibility, and community was created

(Forman, 2005). The Reggio Emilia Approach has a saying that goes, “A kid has a hundred languages.” All languages - invention, nature, building, fantasy, art, music, dancing, building, talking, signing, science, body, and soul - are united and developed by approach. The usage of several languages helps kids learn new things and comprehend the world around them (Hewitt, 2001). According to the Reggio Emilia method, children have the right to be the leaders of their own education. A child-centered approach, the Reggio Emilia method involves teachers, parents, and the community as participants in a child’s educational journey.

Hewitt (2001) identified five main characteristics of the Reggio Emilia method that set it apart:

Child’s Image: The Reggio Emilia school of thought upholds each child’s rights and perspectives. According to this method, a youngster is a skilled, knowledgeable researcher who has a natural curiosity and is always up for a challenge. The teacher’s job is crucial to a child’s education because the former helps the latter to recognise all the many ways they may learn. Teachers interact with students to collaborate, record, and reflect on each child’s experiences in order to advance learning. The environment serves as a third teacher, according to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, and offers a plethora of possibilities for learning for kids. Preschools with a Reggio Emilia aesthetic are considerate and kind. Children are encouraged to think creatively by the materials in the classroom.

Reggio Emilia instructors painstakingly record every step of the learning process in order to better understand kids and how they learn. All moments, from daily diaries to child-specific observations to kid-created art, are seen as integral parts of the process. Through this record, both teachers and students may see how they are learning.

The links between the home and the school are important to a child’s education, according to the Reggio Emilia Approach. According to Kim and Darling (2009), these five components should be supplemented with three additional major themes that characterise the pedagogy of kindergarten schools in connection to the Malaguzzi model: the child’s image, negotiated learning, and social interactions.

Social, Philosophical, and Psychological Foundations

Respect for the kid, or what Malaguzzi termed “the image of the child,” which is a socially created and shared concept of the child as, is one of the tenets of Reggio Emilia possessing rights as opposed

to just necessities. The kid is seen as being attractive, strong, competent, creative, interested, and full of potential and aspirational wants (Hewitt, 2001).

One of the most crucial factors in fostering a kid's creativity is respect for the youngster as a naturally inquisitive human. Malaguzzi's belief in the power of the image is supported and expanded upon by a variety of educational ideas that make up the social constructivist approach to Reggio Emilia education of the youngster (Hewitt, 2001). It makes extensive use of the theories put forward by Piaget (1973), Dewey (1966), Vygostky (1978), and other thinkers. Malaguzzi developed his idea of education, which is built on relationships, using these concepts as a foundation. It places an emphasis on how each child relates to others and aims to encourage and promote kids' reciprocal interactions with other kids, their families, their teachers, society, and the environment (Forman, 2005).

The curriculum is viewed as a communal activity and a sharing of culture through joint exploration between children and adults who together open topics to speculations and discussion as a result of Reggio Emilia's historical foundations, which are based on collaboration between parents, educators, and the community (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). Learning is a process that happens both individually and in groups, and it takes form as a result of interactions with the environment, with adults, and with other group members. Every educational connection is predicated on time and communication, especially active listening between adults, kids, and the environment. For the creation and validation of knowledge, communication is crucial. In order to foster creativity and curiosity, learning is accomplished via research and group idea exchange.

Knowledge in the Reggio Emilia method is seen as dynamic through the perspective of social constructivism; rather than their being one truth, there are various truths or different kinds of knowing (Hewitt, 2001). Through their "hundred languages" (expressive, communicative, and cognitive), which include speech, movement, drawing, painting, construction, sculpting, shadow play, collage, theatrical play, music, etc., children become more adept at symbolically representing thoughts and emotions (Edwards, 2002).

Creativity has many facets since it may be presented in a wide range of ways and is used in a wide range of situations (Gardner, 1993). Teachers in Reggio Emilia classrooms do not adhere to a predetermined curriculum or criteria defining what is to be learnt in order to allow for these kinds of expression (Hewitt, 2001). These [standards] would force our institutions toward teaching without learning, according to Malaguzzi (1998). Instead of pushing kids to read early on, instructors should

support emergent literacy, which develops organically when kids are exposed to a rich reading environment that encourages them to record and share their thoughts with others. This kind of instruction, which is less concerned with academics and standards, gives instructors and students the chance to think freely, creatively, and critically (Kim, 2011). In contrast to environments that are structured with a strong hierarchy, the collaborative and negotiated process of teaching and learning through lengthy open-ended projects occurs in carefully designed environments that offer “complexity and beauty as well as a sense of well-being.” Providing psychologically safe environments that permit children to explore, experiment, and make mistakes tends to advance children’s creativity rather than concentration on academics, which may cause stress and worry and, in the end, stifle creativity (Edwards et al., 2012).

A manner of thinking, behaving, or producing anything that is unique to the individual and esteemed by that person or others is called creative. Aspects of creativity that are highly appreciated include imagination, curiosity, risk-taking, wonder, flexibility, experimenting, breaking boundaries, and being receptive to new ideas (Runco, 2007). Environments that encourage creativity are often rich in educational opportunities and support children’s independence and respect. It has been shown that families that encourage free exploration and give kids the opportunity to make errors and take chances during extended hours of uninterrupted play foster greater creative development than those who live hurried lives with rigid routines. Similar to this, it has been shown that schools that provide kids uninterrupted play and work hours so they may focus and make independent decisions about activities that suit their interests foster kids’ creativity and critical thinking abilities (Kim, 2011). Furthermore, with an adult’s support, these protracted, uninterrupted times foster problem-solving abilities, which are important for coming up with original ideas (Edwards, 2002). It has also been shown that cooperation and asking open-ended questions improve the creative process (Hewitt, 2001).

The capacity of a kid to build on prior knowledge determines the brain development leading to that child’s ability to absorb information, comprehend language, solve issues, make choices, and recall information (cognitive development). By teaching them the skills necessary for cognition, giving kids the chance to think critically and solve issues promotes cognitive growth. According to Delrio (2012), the early years of a child’s life are the ideal period to encourage creativity. He also stressed the significance of critical thinking and examined the role of instructors in creating a creative

atmosphere to enable kids to develop intellectually. Delrio (2012) also contends that for children to acquire the critical thinking abilities they will need as adults; it is vital for them to be a part of an environment that encourages creativity when they are between the ages of four and six.

Reggio Emilia approach and the Development of Critical Thinking in Children

Each kid at Reggio Emilia actively participates in their own learning and development. Children are the main characters, or, in Malaguzzi's words, "writers of their own learning" (Malaguzzi, 1998). The learner must be actively involved in the learning process for creativity to flourish (Prentice, 2000). Children at Reggio Emilia ask questions, make hypotheses, make predictions, conduct experiments, reflect on their findings, and go back to previous projects to further their knowledge and add to the depth of their thinking (Hewitt, 2001). The ability to inquire and reflect is crucial for creativity (Prentice, 2000). Piaget asserts that reflection is crucial to creativity since original ideas originate from mental processes rather than external things (Kim, 2011). Teachers act as researchers by recording and evaluating the work of the students after attentive listening and observation. In order to build activities and tasks that are in line with the children's interests, they are able to identify important information about the children's learning, development, and interests via the collection and analysis of the data.

Rather than attempting to direct the children's education, instructors respect it by engaging in it themselves. They serve as mentors and facilitators, encouraging the kids' discoveries by subtly challenging and interrogating them (Hewitt, 2001). They never respond to the children's inquiries, however, since they feel that doing so would put an end to their investigation. because when others inquire "why?" They are not only looking to you for the solutions (the teacher). They want to locate a list of potential responses (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). The tension generated by these open-ended inquiries put forward by both students and professors is what drives the study (Tedeschi, 2012). Children's participation in open-ended inquiry, problem-solving, intellectual debate, and going beyond established practises and preconceived notions, creates opportunity for creativity to thrive (Prentice, 2000). Additionally, working actively with parents and the community is a part of the teachers' responsibilities. The Reggio Emilia method is founded on collaboration from all perspectives (Hewitt, 2001). Collaboration and teamwork abilities both boost creativity (Kim, 2011).

Any early childhood setting may benefit from using these inspiring ideas from the Reggio Emilia method to encourage children's creativity:

Designing the classroom environment to promote more collaborative work between students; Actively collaborating with parents and the community and informing them about creativity and its significance at the early childhood level; Establishing teachers as researchers and reflective thinkers. Dialoguing with children through open-ended and probing questions that fuel the research process.

The image of the kid is heavily emphasised in the Reggio Emilia method. The method makes use of the environment, the instructor, the family, and the other students as teachers. The social constructivist method encourages interpersonal connections and promotes them from a young age in order to provide kids a solid basis on which to grow. The programme's short history, which began in Italy after World War II, helped set the Reggio Emilia method in perspective. The culture of the concept and the goal of the approach were examined by looking at the program's history. The guiding principles of Reggio Emilia provided further background for the present investigation. The essential advantages of the Reggio Emilia method have been the subject of prior research. Prior research highlights the advantages of the Reggio Emilia method because it promotes socialising and teamwork while also offering a setting that is thought to stimulate creativity and academic risk.

As it aligns with current theoretical research, the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education serves as a model for the growth of young children's creativity. By fostering open-ended projects, an emergent curriculum, discussion between instructors and students, creative play, introspection, and taking intellectual risks, the method supports the growth of young children's creativity. Early childhood educators and administrators may take inspiration from Reggio Emilia's appreciation for and celebration of children's innate interests and awe. Thus, it is recommended in the study that; As it addresses a child's whole development at the pre-primary education level for a smooth and successful transition to primary school level, the government should see to the implementation of the Reggio Emilia teaching method; Early childhood educators and administrators should create projects that are solely inspired by children's interests and enquisitiveness, and then use these projects to their full potential to give kids a platform to express their creativity and support the growth of their creative thinking abilities; The Reggio Emilia strategy has shown to be a workable way to foster children's creative thinking and overall development. Making an effort to officially educate early childhood education instructors via seminars, workshops, or other in-service training on the Reggio Emilia Instructional Approach methodology is important.

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