The Reggio Emilia Approach in New Mexico: 
Preschool Children Supported as Capable, Competent Learners

What Is The Reggio Emilia Approach?
The municipal preprimary schools in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia have been attracting worldwide attention from educators for several years. Reggio Emilia is a town located in the northern part of Italy that has approximately 130,000 inhabitants. In the 1940s, after the end of World War II, a group of parents decided to use money from the sale of old army tanks to create a quality preschool program for children in reaction to the previous fascist government (Malaguzzi, 1992). Several years later, Malaguzzi, an educational leader in Italy, was impressed by the community’s dedication to their children and offered to help the town develop an approach to working with children that combined theories from Dewey, Bruner, and Vygotsky.

One of the main differences between the Reggio Emilia approach and other curriculum approaches that focus on children’s interests is that the basis of a Reggio Emilia inspired program is supported by a complex and unique set of principles. Reggio Emilia educators formulated guiding principles with the image of children or the interests of children as the foundation. These principles are woven together and, in order to understand the Reggio Emilia approach, it is important to discuss all these underlying principles. Gandini (2002) stated that they must be seen as tightly connected for a, “coherent philosophy in which each point influences, and is influenced by all the others” (p. 16). The six principles include: (1) the image of the child; (2) collaboration between children, parents, and teachers; (3) the teacher as researcher; (4) the environment as the third teacher; (5) organization as fundamental; and (6) project studies.

The image of the child. The foremost principle of the Reggio Emilia approach addresses the image of the child. Within the Reggio approach children are seen as powerful, curious, and ready to learn. Reggio Emilia educators believe that children have rights rather than needs and these occupy a primary role in their education (Malaguzzi, 1998) It is felt that we gain greater understanding of all children’s learning as we observe the strategies children with special rights use as they integrate their unique accommodations specific to the disability into their lives. (Want to learn more? Edwards, Carolyn, Gandini, Lella and Forman, George, Editors. The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation. 3rd Edition. Praeger. 2012.)

Documentation. The presence of the strong child’s voice in Reggio schools is visually evident in documentation and documentation panels. Documentation panels are created using children’s work, photographs from projects, and examples of dialogue. These convey to the children the message that their efforts, intentions, and ideas are taken seriously. These displays are not created to serve primarily as decoration or ways of showing off the children’s work. Rather, taking children’s work seriously in this way encourages them to approach their
work responsibly and reinforces the idea that their work is considered important.

Documentation plays a crucial role in the planning of future activities. The teachers work with children while they conduct complex individual or small-group tasks over a period of several days or weeks. Intense reflections about conversations with children, children’s work, observations, videos, or pictures help teachers consider what directions to pursue with consequent activities.

Collaboration between parents, teachers, and children. Parents, teachers, and children are seen as partners in education. Collaboration exists among all participants. The ideas that parents bring to the school are valued and exchanged with teachers and children. The parents’ voices are not perceived as a threat, but as important contributors to the dialogue concerning children’s learning (Spaggiari, 1993). Close working relationships exist among teachers; they rely on each other’s perspective, input and guidance during ongoing studies.

Teachers as researchers. The teacher’s role is seen as partner, guide, and nurturer with the Reggio Emilia approach. The teacher’s role shifts from that of giving children direct instruction to using children’s thoughts and ideas to guide the direction of the activities (Gandini, 2004). Teachers act as researchers as they carefully observe and listen to children while they document children’s work.

In addition, teachers are committed to their own professional growth and use documentation to reflect on their own practice. Rinaldi (1998) stated that when discussing the documentation of children’s work, teachers simultaneously begin to question themselves and each other. Teachers collaboratively discuss their interactions with children and individually make changes to their practice based on their reflections. As a result, teachers are seen as researchers who investigate their own practice in addition to studying the work of children. This approach to teaching adopted by Reggio educators, is valued and supported within the schools’ organizational design (Rankin, 1993). (To learn more: Pelo, Ann. To See Takes Time: Growing Curriculum From Children’s Theories. DVD. Harvest Resources.)

Environment as the third teacher. The organization of the physical environment is crucial to the Reggio Emilia approach. The environment is designed to inform and engage children and visitors to the schools. Every aspect of the design of the schools reflects identity, purpose, engagement, and communication. Every detail is carefully thought through from the color of the walls, to the shape of the furniture, and arrangement of objects on shelves and tables.
**Organization as fundamental.** The organization of the Reggio Emilia approach is complex. Haigh (2007) claimed that cooperation is needed at all agency levels. The organizational structure supports a cooperative system with members of a team of pedagogical coordinators, called pedagogisti, who also support the relationships among all teachers, parents, and community and city administrators (Haigh, 2008). (Resource: Scheinfeld, David, Haigh, Karen and Sheinfeld, Sandra. *We are All Explorers: Learning and Teaching with Reggio Principles in Urban Settings*. 2008. Teachers College Press.)

**Project studies.** Rinaldi (2006) described the Reggio approach as a co-construction of knowledge between teachers, children, and parents as projects rather than a curriculum. This approach includes the implementation of in-depth studies that are based on children’s interests. The teachers work with children while they conduct complex individual or small-group tasks over a period of several days or weeks. Teachers start with the children’s interests and purposely include intentionally selected materials or experiences related to it as jumping off points.

**The Wonder of Learning Exhibit in New Mexico**

**The presence of the Wonder of Learning** exhibit is tied to an interest in raising the quality of early childhood education for children, families, and educators within our New Mexican communities. The North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) and the New Mexico Wonder of Learning Collaborative have chosen: *Promoting the Rights of Children: Community Participation and Dialogue* as the theme for the *Wonder of Learning* professional development initiatives. The professional development initiatives will draw upon the experiences of local, national, and international speakers and will serve as a vehicle for dialogue in promoting quality and excellence for New Mexico’s early childhood programs.

**The Wonder of Learning** exhibit has the potential to bring to life learning opportunities that are foundational to the principles of the New Mexico Early Learning Guidelines being adopted by the many early childhood programs and Common Core competencies being newly introduced in New Mexico public schools. The *Wonder of Learning* exhibit demonstrates what can happen when educators, parents, and policy makers nurture the social and emotional intelligences of children and support collaborative problem-solving and the creative capacity of young children.

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**The Wonder of Learning Exhibit**  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
1801 Mountain Road, NW  
July—December 2014  

“Promoting the Rights of Children: Community Participation and Dialogue”
The Wonder of Learning exhibit and related professional development, and family events create opportunities for children, teachers, families, and the community as a whole to experience together the delight of learning about our world. The exhibit and related events have the potential to:

1) Increase community awareness as to the importance and substance of high-quality early education in preparing children for school.

2) Expose educators, childcare workers, policymakers, and families to an innovative international exhibit of early learning experiences that makes visible what it means to support the creative thinking capacity and wonder of learning in children.

3) Elevate dialogue and encourage action amongst educators, policymakers, childcare providers and parents to consider the possibilities of what early education could look like in their communities.

4) Demonstrate the importance of quality professional development for those working with young children.

The New Mexico Wonder of Learning Collaborative is made up of individuals and organizations throughout New Mexico who are planning the arrival of the traveling exhibit The Wonder of Learning from Reggio Emilia, Italy. The exhibit will be in Albuquerque, New Mexico in July 2014 for a six-month stay. The WOL exhibit provides rich, deep and compelling examples of what can happen when there is a common vision and focus on early childhood education. Every city that has hosted The Wonder of Learning exhibit and professional development initiatives reports that they had a major impact on the quality of early childhood education and professional skills of educators in their local communities. Bringing the Wonder of Learning exhibit to New Mexico presents an opportunity to highlight our own communities and challenges us to re-think what early childhood education means.

Upcoming Event:
“Celebrate the Wonder of Learning: Encounters with the Reggio Emilia Approach in New Mexico”.
August 28, 2013, 6:30 – 8:30 PM NM School for the Deaf, Albuquerque Preschool, 3802 Hermosa Drive, NE.
To RSVP call (505)414-0599 or email wonderoflearning@mail.com