



# Integrating Reggio Emilia's philosophy into India's Pre-schools

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The very idea that Early Childhood Education plays a crucial role in a child's development was a relatively novel one in the early 2000's, which eventually led me back to Geeta Narayanan, the then Director of Mallya Aditi International School, who set us on the Reggio Emilia pathway.

Reggio, like all other methodologies, had its inception and creation in time and space. "Developed by a teacher - Loris Malaguzzi, along with the parents of the villages around Reggio Emilia in Italy after a great and destructive World War II, it was believed that children were in need of a new way of learning: the assumption was that people form their own personality during early years of development and, moreover, that children are endowed with a hundred of languages. The aim of this approach is teaching how to make them useful in everyday life. The program was based on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum" (Source: Wikipedia)

For our Early Learning Center, we had found a connection. We embraced its overall philosophy, secretly delighted that many of the aspects of Reggio, especially the "self-guided curriculum" permitted us flexibility and the capacity to explore, research and adapt to the local flavor and conditions.

The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based primarily on the following set of principles:

- children must have some control over the direction of their learning
- children must be able to learn through experiences of touching, moving, listening, seeing, and hearing

- children have a relationship with other children and with material items in the world that children must be allowed to explore and
- children must have endless ways and opportunities to express themselves.

(Source: Wikipedia)

Our physical space set up under Reggio's flexible terms started with the environment as the third teacher, a courtyard and several nooks for children to meet and interact often, a seamless (and doorless) merging of the inside-outside (here we were hugely advantaged by the salubrious Bangalore climate), welcoming of parents at all times into the space that their children were to thrive in and, above all, a deep respect for all things that came our way. So also a garden that was chemical free and full of trees, falling leaves, flowers, fruits, many-legged residents and visiting ones too and an atmosphere of hundred languages that encouraged children to be themselves, share and negotiate with each other constantly.

We were determined that as far as possible, no conditioned adult world would 'shape' the child's character with any kind of bias or preconceived notions and so we set forth to develop a curriculum that would leave children excited about their relationship with the external world and with such a deep knowledge and understanding of themselves that nothing that they encountered was to shake or destroy their confidence in themselves.

Teachers were encouraged to learn from the conversations between children and document it. One aspect of Reggio particularity excited me - the idea of 'provoking' children's thinking and problem-solving abilities, so out of this was born our hands-on Science Programme.



Coming from a generation that entertained ourselves mainly with books, I was confident that the key to developing self-learners had its basis in developing a love and passion for reading. Another novel experiment partly based on observations of my own hyperactive behavioral needs, led me to decide that all children could choose how often and when they needed to move or sit, stand, walk about, chat, revisit outcomes as often as they needed, and even control their own learning curve. Observation of this freedom of action led to some amazing consequences and conclusions. Teachers became stress-free, talked gently, affectionately, and began to enjoy their relationships with everyone around and hierarchy and conflict went for a very long walk. It created a safe environment that allowed the making of mistakes as a form of learning- a radical but perhaps one of the most effective learning tools for both teacher and child. The children hardly ever sat, but if they did it was for specific reasons of their own choosing - forming constantly changing groups or to complete tasks or during eating and learning became joyful and natural – substantiated by a low chatter of childish voices that softly permeated the atmosphere.

To implement and adapt Reggio in India required courage and a belief that “all children have rights and are beautiful, powerful, competent, creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires.”(Source: Wikipedia)

To follow Reggio Emilia requires teachers to be excited and in constant reflection of their own learning. This requires a fundamental change in teaching methods and attitudes because much of our teaching is translated and delivered, not even through our training programmes, but from how we were actually taught as children!



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