

# The Pedagogical Role of Reggio-inspired Studios In Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to describe, interpret, and appraise Reggio Emilia's approach to education, particularly in regards to studio time, a place in the curriculum when art is prominent. This study examined two preschool sites, one in Colorado and one in Missouri. Data collection methods included observations, interviews and the collection of artifacts. The findings suggest that Reggio-inspired studios help preschool-aged children learn to use materials as 'languages' to express their thinking, questions, feelings and ideas.

## Problem

- Few studies have solely examined art studios in Reggio-inspired programs to see what children are learning in these environments.
- Creativity and the arts are often misunderstood in early childhood and the Reggio Emilia approach places a strong focus on each.
- This contemporary model questions the commonly accepted outcome-based view of educating young children.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze how the implementation of studios, as utilized in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, contribute to early childhood education experiences for young children. By describing, interpreting, and appraising the intentions and operations of two Reggio-inspired studios, the researcher sheds new light on an alternative approach to educating young children and the role of art in the field of early childhood education.

## Research Questions

This study was built upon four major questions:

1. What is the role of the studio in a Reggio-inspired school?
2. What is happening in the studio?
3. What are children learning in this environment?
4. How does the studio cultivate children's hundred languages?

## Relevant Literature

The Reggio Emilia philosophy, a progressive approach to early childhood education conceived in Reggio Emilia, Italy, places a strong emphasis on the arts, creativity and integrated curriculum.

"The most dramatic changes that have occurred in research on early childhood art and art education in the past decade involve changes of perspective or theoretical orientation" (Thompson, 2006, p. 224).

In the past decade, educators have questioned the research and theory on which the practice of early childhood art has been based (Thompson, 2006). This confusion results from many factors including what qualifies as art, questions about children's developmental levels, teacher's own lack of training in the arts, and negative stereotypes about the arts (Jalongo & Stamp, 1997; Thompson, 2006).

Whitfield (2009) justifies, "to omit the arts from young children's learning experiences deprives them of the opportunity to transmediate, (i.e., develop a repertoire of strategies to use across symbol systems)" (p. 156).

## Procedures

The qualitative data collected, via the research method educational connoisseurship and criticism, included observations, formal and informal interviews, and artifacts.

### Sites

Boulder, Colorado  
St. Louis, Missouri

### Participants

- 2 Studio Teachers
- 10 Preschool children interviewed
- 45+ Preschool children observed
- Classroom teachers and administrators

## Data Analysis

The overall pattern of data analysis was inductive, moving from specifics to generalizations.

- The conceptual framework of six dimensions of schooling guided the data analysis: intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical, evaluative, and aesthetic.
- The researcher used a coding system for themes that re-occurred when examining field notes until a point of saturation was reached.

## Findings

Findings reveal that Reggio-inspired studios have the potential to promote the following behaviors in children:

1. *positive approaches to learning*
2. *an ecological perspective and creative thinking*
3. *theory building*
4. *communication through many different symbolic languages*

The findings also suggest that Reggio-inspired studios help children learn that there are many ways to express their thinking, questions, feelings and ideas through using materials as languages.

## Limitations

- Lack of cultural diversity amongst participants, including studio teachers, children, parents, and classroom teachers.
- Two studio sites were studied. Therefore, a next step would be to study other Reggio-inspired studios in the U.S.

## Conclusions

The Reggio Emilia philosophy adds to the conversation about early childhood education by offering an alternative way of educating young children.

- At a time when art is often seen as a frill or as a "craft" activity in many schools, Reggio-inspired studios demonstrate how art is a cognitive activity.
- The studio practices studied in this research provide an example of how children use a variety of materials (chalk, paint, wire, clay, light, etc.) as "languages" or modes through which to communicate their ideas, questions, and understandings.
- The research also demonstrated how the recycled materials (tubes, wire, fabric, etc.) required the children to employ creative thinking when working with these materials, which also in turn helped to develop an ecological perspective in these young children.
- Lastly, data revealed children displaying positive approaches to learning, which include: joy, persistence, flexibility, self-regulation, engagement and motivation to learn.

## Social Change Implications

- Contributes to the growing knowledge base of how to integrate artistic thinking into early childhood curriculum and supports the justification that the arts are cognitive activities.
- Provides one model of how to promote creative thinking with our youngest learners.
- This approach relies heavily upon the reuse and recycling of materials, teaching children the importance of and how to preserve the earth and its resources.

