



## **Reggio Emilia Approach Around the World**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this literature review (Alsedrani, 2018) is to present an overview of the Reggio Emilia approach (REA), the events that preceded its development, its fundamental principles, and its theoretical frameworks (social constructivist theory and the community of collaboration perspective). In addition, several applications of the Reggio Emilia approach in different countries were reviewed such as: the US, Canada, China, South Africa, and finally, Kuwait. In each country, literature about the unique difficulties and successes the REA faced will be discussed. Particular cultural advantages or disadvantages as they relate to the success or failure of the REA in these countries were analyzed .

*Keywords:* early childhood education, Reggio Emilia approach, adopting.

## نهج ريجيو إميليا حول العالم

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المستخلص:

يتمثل الهدف الرئيس من مراجعة الأدبيات المقدمة بالبحث الحالي (Alsedrani, 2018) في تقديم لمحة عامة عن نهج ريجو إميليا، والأحداث التي سبقت تطوره، ومبادئه الأساسية، وأطره النظرية (النظرية البنائية الاجتماعية ومنظور مجتمع التعاون)، إضافة إلى ذلك، تمت مراجعة العديد من تطبيقات نهج ريجيو إميليا في بلدان مختلفة مثل الولايات المتحدة وكندا والصين وجنوب إفريقيا وأخيراً الكويت، ولقد تناولت الأدبيات كل دولة من الدول المذكورة، كما تمت مناقشة الأدبيات الخاصة بالصعوبات المتباينة والنجاحات التي واجهها نهج ريجيو إميليا، كما تم تحليل مزايا ومساوئ ثقافية معينة وصلتها بنجاح أو فشل نهج ريجيو إميليا في هذه البلدان. الكلمات المفتاحية: تربية الطفولة المبكرة، نهج ريجيو إميليا، التبني.

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## Overview of the Reggio Emilia Approach:

Reggio Emilia is a town in the north of Italy known for its educational approach after World-War II (Cagliari et al., 2016). However, as the following discussion will make clear, this town's name came to represent so much more than a tiny, war-torn, Italian village, bracketed by mountain ranges, and home to a road that survives to this day from ancient Roman times, the Via Emilia (Nelson, 2000). To truly understand the Reggio Emilia (RE) philosophy one must first understand the events that preceded its development and the historical setting in which educators embarked upon such a novel educational approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).

World War II destroyed whole regions of Italy, tearing away at the social fabric of towns and villages. Schools had to be rebuilt, teachers trained, an essentially new system of education instituted on the ashes of the old system. Because the national state was in such disarray, local communities found themselves at the forefront of providing education to local children. This gave rise to an educational approach that concerned itself not only with teaching children, but also recognized that granting public assistance to the poorest families was necessary for their preschool-aged children to succeed in school (Cagliari et al., 2016; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). At first, various private sources, such as charities and donations funded these schools, which were the earliest predecessors to early childhood education (ECE) programs based on the RE philosophy (Gandini, 2012). Over time, however, such private funding was replaced by public financing of Italian preschool programs, at first by Italian municipalities, and then via national governmental funding that also codified this new RE educational philosophy into law in 1968 (Cagliari et al., 2016). This new view of ECE was based upon the RE philosophy's core belief that teaching preschoolers needs to be accompanied by the availability of social programs designed to aid these same parents and children (Nelson, 2000). Such governmental assistance and welfare programs made available to the nation's poor, as well as the granting of greater access to medicine and education, were intended to treat some of the biggest social ills plaguing the nation, such as infant mortality, as well as helping put an end to the cycle of poverty (New, 1993).



The Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) that developed in post-war, post-fascist Italy was unique because placed the child at the center, who viewed as active learner instead of as blank slate, talented, powerful, capable to create their own learning experiences, and full of curiosity (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Lindsay, 2015). Thereby, the child came to be recognized as having the same human rights as adult citizens, and communities wanted their children to receive every possible opportunity to develop to their fullest potential (Hewett, 2001).

This new approach to kindergarten education proved to be quite successful (Alnageeb, 2009). As of four years ago, Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2012) identified over 30 municipals RE infant-toddler centers and kindergartens for children under six that have sprung up throughout Italy since 1963 (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). This comes as no surprise because the REA is considered unique above all other ECE approaches, one with the power to inspire educators all over the world (Alshawareb, 2012). Each school in each country applies its own version of the REA according to several considerations such as: their children's specific needs and interest, and the specific community's social and cultural contexts (Alnageeb, 2009), in which this assimilation ensure that "no two schools will ever be alike; what works for [one] Reggio Emilia preschool will not necessarily work for another Reggio school" (Inan, 2009, p. 9). In other words, the application of the REA may vary somewhat from school to school or from country to country, but in all places, it maintains its basic fundamental principles. This ability to adapt is an important reason it has been successfully adopted throughout the world (McCall, 2008; Newsweek Magazine, 1991).

### **The Core Principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach**

Gandini (1993) stressed that the underlying ideas of the REA are "tightly connected, in which each point influences and is influenced by all the others" (p. 5). These interconnected essence principles have to be wholly adopted to gain the benefits the REA offers (Cagliari et al., 2016). Portions of this philosophy may be customized to concur the current school's needs and their cultural traditions or religious ideals; however, its key beliefs must be implemented as it is (Alnageeb, 2009; Inan, 2009). For instance, a school may adjust this philosophy's less important features, such as

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*how* it chooses to document the teaching/learning process and whether to utilize all available media or just one or two methods as students work on learning projects. (Palestis, 1994). However, if the adopting school attempts to abandon or rewrite the core principles, then it is a RE school in name only. (Cagliari et al., 2016; Hewett, 2001).

Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the REA, once explained how undervalued children have been throughout history, and how powerful they actually are; his passion to undo this centuries-old disservice to children is reflected in every aspect of the REA (Cagliari et al., 2016). The REA is a challenge to define. At its heart is the idea that children need to have intimate relationships not only with the other students and their teachers, but also with the objects that physically make up their world (Hewett, 2001). Children must be encouraged to investigate everything in their environment—the educators, fellow students, the actual items in the space where they are learning—such that they can learn by exercising and utilizing all of their senses (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). By encouraging children to investigate and experience their surroundings in this comprehensive manner, the REA endeavors to supply each child with holistic learning experiences (Cagliari et al., 2016).

**The image of the child.** As Malaguzzi (2012) himself stated, “All people—and I mean scholars, researchers, and teachers, who . . . study children seriously—have ended up by discovering not . . . the limits and weaknesses of children but rather their surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities linked with an inexhaustible need for expression and realization” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; p. 53). Given Malaguzzi’s powerful convictions regarding how best to define children and their potential, it is not at all surprising that the REA is constructed around the children, with their numerous developing skills and gifts at the center of all aspects (Cagliari et al., 2016; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). It therefore makes sense that one of this philosophy’s most important tenets is that children are competent and powerful, able to teach other children, their teachers and parents (Nelson, 2000). Malaguzzi explained in a speech given in 1991 that this view does refer to the child as creator and the co-creator of the curriculum (Cagliari et al., 2016). To him, it was of the utmost importance that children were seen as being full of potential, yet still in need of governmental protections (Cagliari et al., 2016; Lindsay, 2015).



**The utilization of projects.** The REA values the projects and its power of helping children learn through group, class or individual experience that reflects how REA see the child as social being who have the right to explore the world (Cagliari et al., 2016; Wurm, 2005). There are other benefits. Project-based learning has been found to be an excellent way to relate and absorb new information (Lindsay, 2015); and projects result in hands-on learning, while also being rich in material for small or big group discussions (Cagliari et al., 2016). For example, RE educators might facilitate projects involving plants by planning, designing, preparing, and executing a small classroom garden project. Readings, drawings, measurements, arithmetic, group discussions, and test plantings of different plants could all be included in this unit. Such hands-on, group projects could last for a day or much longer, and are often divided into stages (Wurm, 2005). Such projects provide children with opportunities to explore and observe the subject of the project, draw up hypotheses, and discuss issues related to the same subject or new emergent topics for as long as is needed (Cagliari et al., 2016; Hewett, 2001).

**The role of parents.** The RE philosophy acknowledges the importance of a collaborative partnership among teachers and parents , which, impact the children learning experiences in school positively (Nelson, 2000). Given the important role parents play in their children's lives, children's learning could only be enhanced by including the parents in the process (Wurm, 2005). Their involvement could even foster a new type of learning that occurs between all three stakeholders—parents, children, and teachers (Nelson, 2000). Some researchers list this tenet as one that involves not only the parents, but also the community at large (Cagliari et al., 2016; Lindsay, 2015).

This collaboration between the RE school administration, the faculty, the students, and their family members (as well as their home community) may take several forms. There may be a collaborative effort in designing and discussing school policy, or simply regular parental visits to the classroom to provide daily interactions between family members, the children, and their teachers at school, for instance (Wurm, 2005). In these situations, parents are highly encouraged to assist the class and the teacher in many ways, such as planning and accompanying the children on field trips (Wurm, 2005). Family and/or community members are encouraged to help organize special events at

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the preschools, such as an ice cream social, a play, a concert, or talent show where educators and other staff can invite the students and their families to attend a social event at the RE school itself (Wurm, 2005).

**Children’s rights as citizens.** A core tenet of the RE philosophy is that children are deserving of basic protections and rights from their government (Lindsay, 2015; Nelson, 2000). In the RE view, a child is a powerful, competent being, one able to learn from and teach fellow students, teachers, and parents, and thus deserving of all human rights granted adults. The well-being of the children is inextricably linked to that of the parents and the teachers, and children have the right to a quality education and also the best of what a society has to offer (Cagliari et al., 2016).

**The role of teachers as co-learners and partners.** In the REA, teachers do not conform to the classic image that often comes to mind, one where the teacher is stationed in front of a classroom full of students sitting quietly in neat rows, looking forward, scrawling notes while the teacher talks and explains. Instead, it posits teachers as children’s partners in discovery and learning (Lindsay, 2015). Teachers in the RE classroom actively facilitate discussions. Often, “they may walk away from that experience having learned as much as their students have” (Alsedrani, 2018). The teacher plays her key role as a facilitator or guide to her students, leading them to new experiences based on their own, personal experiences, constantly ready to intervene at crucial moments, such as by “providing the child with the provocations and tools necessary to achieve [their] goals . . . and by providing scaffolding to assist children in their learning and consequent development” (Hewett, 2001, p. 97). Most importantly, the RE teacher work to know the children as individuals, each one with his/her unique learning journeys (Valentine, 2006). These teacher roles encourage trust between the teachers and students (Valentine, 2006). In RE centers, the educators are viewed as “co-learners” and “risk-takers” (Staley, 1998, p. 22) because of the multitude of roles they play with the children, their families, with other educators, and with the community that is home to their kindergarten.

RE classrooms are different and unique for several reasons. One of these is the fact that each such classroom is assigned not one, but two teachers, each of whom have to invest 36 hours/weekly into their teacher role, the majority of this time to be spent with the children, with four to five hours/weekly for meetings with other teachers (Rinaldi, 1994). These four to five hours are there to also





provide time for the teachers to receive on the job, “in-service training” (Palestis, 1994, p. 17). The two teachers who consider partners work with the same group of children, and they remain together as a group for the entire three years that they spend at RE centers (Rinaldi, 1994). These two teachers work together, hand in hand, thereby enriching the children’s learning experiences throughout their three-year tenure at the school. Such a teaching partnership is a critically important element of the REA to ECE because, among other benefits, it presents the opportunity for the children to be observed “from different points of view” (Rinaldi, 1994, p. 56). Therefore, it provides every classroom with two sets of trained eyes, ears, and minds to document and track the children’s learning process and progress, and to collaborate on designing future activities (Rinaldi, 1994).

**A focus on aesthetics.** Classroom organization is another important feature of the REA. Cagliari et al. (2016) consider this instrumental for effective teaching and learning. The RE classroom should be open and inviting to the children so they feel encouraged to explore every nook and corner; they should be given the freedom to move around, to feel free to either maintain silence or make noise, whichever is appropriate for the material being taught (Eckhoff & Spearman, 2009). The designs for these spaces recognize how many hours the children spend there every day and therefore should be built so that a student can choose to be with others or be alone, use kitchen facilities and sleep, if necessary (Cagliari et al., 2016). The REA encourages messiness; it appreciates that children feel liberated by being messy, which may inspire them to become even more creative (Eckhoff & Spearman, 2009). Also, RE encourages visits by parents, local community leaders, and others so that they too can become part of the learning environment (Cagliari et al., 2016). Accordingly, the space should be designed such that rooms can be arranged and rearranged according to what setup best suits a particular activity or project (Nelson, 2000).

**Documentation.** rigorous documentation of the children’s learning experiences is not done simply for record keeping, but to assist teachers evaluate their lessons and effective interventions in the learning process, and also to help involve parents through watching their child’s activities as well (Cagliari et al., 2016; Staley, 1998). It

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provides teachers with material to compare, exchange, and discuss among themselves. Importantly, it creates a record of the child's progress, which in and of itself may inspire discussion between students and teachers, and among the children (Nelson, 2000).

**The emergent curriculum.** RE classrooms give students the freedom to shape their own curricula (Nelson, 2000). Student discussions among themselves and with teachers helps teachers discover ways to proceed with a particular unit or lesson (Hewett, 2001). If a certain topic is found to be especially interesting to the students, teachers have the liberty to devote as much time they wish to a subject (Hewett, 2001). Without a prescribed curriculum, the children can set their own pace, as well as take the learning experience in whichever direction most appeals to them (Nelson, 2000).

As Malaguzzi (1993b) argued many decades ago, the REA highlights the critical importance of documenting the children's accomplishments, as well as their journey of discovery, and how doing so encourages these students to explore even more; they feel valued and important when they see their work hanging on the school wall or recorded on video or smartphone photograph, encouraging them to continue performing at a high level (Malaguzzi, 1993b; Tarr, 2004).

**The clock does not set the time.** In the REA, relationships between teachers and students are preserved from year to year, that helps the teachers determine the amount of time the children wish to spend on a project or activity (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). Children retain the same teachers for three years until they graduate to primary school (Hewett, 2001). Therefore, teachers design a loose all-day schedule for the children, while ensuring they will still engaged in potential learning experiences (Nelson, 2000).

**The environment as the third teacher.** This feature of the REA brings attention to the importance of not only the classroom environment, but also the environment outside the classroom as well. Few people would disagree that *where* one is exposed to learning is at least indirectly related to how much is learned (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2009). In RE philosophy the environment functions an important role that it has been known as "the third teacher" (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2009, p. 40; Nelson, 2000, p. 16; New, 2009, p. 8). Under this philosophy, the environment should remain fluid and flexible so it can be rearranged to meet the variety of educational activities and offered



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a stage where interesting and inspiring activities could stimulate the children's desire to learn and inherent curiosity (Firlik, 1994).

**The hundred languages of children.** The REA provides children with different ways of learning related to each child's interests (Eckhoff & Spearman, 2009; Tarr, 2004). It encourages the use of many different ways of expression, such as drawings and art, music, words, games, dance and movement, and the use of pictures or symbols—which are just a few examples of what called “the hundred languages of children” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p. 10). The term comes from a poem by RE's founder Loris Malaguzzi and expresses the belief that children are better equipped than most adults presume them to be at communicating their ideas and finding ways to maximize their learning. This occurs when learning is allowed to take place naturally and through several different channels according to each child's different intelligences, needs, interests, levels of curiosity, observational skills, and skills for working within groups (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012; Wurm, 2005). Furthermore, children use verbal and non-verbal methods of self-expression, such as “the language of drawing, painting, clay, or writ[ing] to express what they understand” from the environment surrounding them to create and translate their knowledge (Davilla & Koenig, 1998, p. 19).

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The RE educational philosophy is based on a blend of several theories that describe how children learn from different perspectives. These include the social constructivist framework inspired and shaped by Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Bruner (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Gandini, 1993; Inan, 2009; New, 1993). theoretical orientation related to the community of learners' perspectives in the REA was explored also (Cagliari et al., 2016; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).

### **The Social Constructivist Theory:**

For ECE generally, social constructivism became an important theory in the middle of the 20th century out of frustration by ECE educators who were critical of the way children were being educated, described, and viewed in ways that failed to fully appreciate their many capabilities. (Saadah & Ibrahim, 2011). They wanted to explore new ways of teaching to improve the children's learning. A number of theorists—Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Bruner—became especially

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concerned with child development at that time (Saadah & Ibrahim, 2011). Moreover, they shared the belief that individuals construct reality through their interactions with environments, an idea that would come to define a major pillar of the REA (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Their contributions, and those of many other educators, eventually led to the development of the constructivist theory, which places a high value on interaction with one's environment as a cornerstone of learning at all ages, especially in early childhood. This resulted in the "implementation of their theories into practice and practice into theories, modeled for all the effects of collaboration, exploration, and inquiry" (Nelson, 2000, p. 10). Their ideas shaped the core principles of the RE philosophy (Rankin, 1997), and continue to guide this teaching method today.

RE schools are based upon the idea that children and adults learn through interaction with other people and the environment. Such interactions form the basis of a person's knowledge and values (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Firlik, 1996). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) agrees and thinks it a vital ingredient for children to understand increasingly complex ideas, form long-lasting learning experiences, and create meaning in their world (Martalock, 2012). This speaks to a key element of the REA—the child's purposeful interaction and engagement with the social and physical world. (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). RE educators encourage students to communicate and exchange their experiences and ideas with peers, parents, teachers, school staff, and other community members (Cagliari et al., 2016; Hewett, 2001). Children in these kindergartens are also provided with numerous opportunities to explore the world they live in, so much so that the classroom is sometimes altered to resemble aspects of the world outdoors (Cagliari et al., 2016; Nelson, 2000).

To expand more on the connection among the relevant social constructivist theories, the image of the child, and the child's role in the REA will be discussed. Malaguzzi (1993b) argued that children have four characters, or special ways of learning effectively. First, all children have the right to learn and educators have to consider the child's nature in lesson planning (Hewett, 2001). Second, a central idea, which Piaget called "active education" (Piaget, 1973, p. 93) is that children are seen as active learners, fully capable of exploring, solving problems, and producing knowledge (Almomani, Ihmeideh & Haroun, 2011). According to Piaget (1973), any knowledge acquired



by children's explorations can be developed as needed, so that children can use that knowledge as scaffolding to discover and investigate further and make more connections to other knowledge. Third, children should be viewed as researchers who actively explore, ask questions, formulate and test hypotheses, and contemplate their results. Malaguzzi spoke of a fourth character—that children are social beings who build their knowledge through social interaction with others by using a number of “languages” and media such as: music, dancing, painting, and/or using words in conversations (Hewett, 2001). All these views of children as learners were perspectives first discussed principally by Piaget and Vygotsky who both believed that children cannot construct knowledge if they are isolated from others (Gandini, 1993; Hewett, 2001). In other words, effective learning with young children is contingent on maximizing purposeful interactions with the physical, social, and cultural environment (Tarr, 2004).

### **The View of Community Collaboration:**

The REA sprang up in a small Italian community that came together in post-WWII Italy to collect rubble so that they could build a kindergarten to educate their children. Recognizing and utilizing the power of community is a fundamental REA practice that supports its goal to provide children with an interactive classroom, a classroom that is not isolated but integrated in community activities (e.g., Cagliari et al., 2016; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). The NAEYC described the REA as offering “one of the most renowned examples of community-supported childcare systems in Western Europe” (as cited in New, 1990, p. 4).

Different varieties of collaboration can exist between learning partners working and interacting with RE centers and schools. These include:

- Establishing collaborative relationships between teachers and other education staff to interpret, clarify, collaborate, and execute particular aspects of the REA (Gandini, 1993), while also maintaining strong relationships and powerful partnerships with their students' families (Firlik, 1996).

- Collaboration needs to occur among the teachers themselves so that those with REA experience support and mentor new teachers (Wurm, 2005).
- RE schools also strive to collaborate directly with their community to help children develop an awareness of the world surrounding them (Wurm, 2005). These collaborative relationships serve as a platform for the exchange of experiences and information between all these parties and help ensure the expansion of the learning community (Wurm, 2005). Originating in the RE schools, the expanded community collaborations led to the formation of close bonds between different members of the same community. Such strong feelings, and the interpersonal connections they help kindle, are an important ingredient in teaching children effectively (McCann, 2014). Furthermore, such connections contribute to the creation of a shared classroom philosophy based upon mutual support that encourages self-confidence, democratic decision-making, and inclusion so that all stakeholders feel an integral part of something much bigger than themselves. Synergy is a helpful word in this context—children, parents, and educators come together, collaborate, and create something greater than the parts (McCann, 2014).
- The most important interactional, or collaborative, relationships are those that are developed between the teachers and their students (Almomani, Ihmeideh & Haroun, 2011). It is here that powerful, close relationships can develop over time—both between the children and their teachers, and among the children themselves (Davilla & Koenig, 1998). This is considered the most important collaborative relationship within the REA because it directly impacts the success or failure of the learning experience (Almomani, Ihmeideh & Haroun, 2011).

### **Adopting the Reggio Emilia Approach around the World:**

Several countries around the world had different experiences in adopting the REA such as: the US, Canada, China, South Africa, and finally, Kuwait. In each country, literature about the unique difficulties



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and successes the REA faced will be discussed. In addition, particular cultural advantages or disadvantages as they relate to the success or failure of the REA in these countries were analyzed.

### **The REA in the United States:**

By the end of the 1980s, the REA was a hot topic among early childhood educators in the US (New, 2009; Staley, 1998). Educators there were searching for an effective developmental pedagogy to improve their ECE programs (New, 2009). Many scholars were interested in exploring the differences between ECE in the US and those inside RE centers in Italy. They wanted to know what made this approach uniquely compelling. Instead of launching RE kindergartens and preschools right away, educators first explored the REA by holding workshops for teachers and providing authentic resources and related materials for US educators (Davilla & Koenig, 1998). This process helped educators understand the core principles of the REA, which they then explained to other teachers and interested parents (Smith, 2014).

Many US educators and scholars satisfied their curiosity by visiting RE schools in Italy and reflecting on their experiences through observational notes published in articles upon their return (Kang, 2007). In his article "Lessons from Reggio Emilia," Palestis (1994) addressed some of the differences between US and Italian public schools. First of all, transplanting the REA to the US educational context was not expected to be an easy process because diversity in US classrooms makes realizing the image of the child as powerful, full of curiosity, and thirsty for knowledge problematic; it was the researchers' contention that US educators are more concerned with meeting baseline goals in a multicultural context than with adopting this image of a child (Firlik, 1996). Additionally, these researchers argued that the differences in the classroom environments between the US and Italy may interfere with the US adoption of the REA (Palestis, 1994).

US preschools provide children with a curriculum divided into discrete subjects (e.g., math, science, reading, and writing) (Nelson, 2000). In contrast, these elements do not exist in RE schools because learning and knowledge there is considered holistically in a manner that does not lend itself to division into separate subjects (Palestis,

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1994). Thus, in a RE school in Italy, children completing a project concerning air and the atmosphere, for instance, might be using math, science, reading, writing, and engineering all at the same time while investigating that topic (Palestis, 1994).

US educators' attitudes towards assessment also reveal important differences from the REA's view (Palestis, 1994). According to Dodd-Nufrio (2011) and Edwards (2002), educators and policymakers in the US have been critical of the lack of evaluation and testing processes in RE schools, and about how Italian teachers are unable to measure learning outcomes based on exterior criteria (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). However, RE educators do not measure a child's learning process, or give tests, or attempt to evaluate the efficiency of their programs in comparison to other RE or traditional schools (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). This is because the REA approach to assessment is integral to documentation, one of its core tenets; during any learning cycle, teachers document what the children do and say to assess their level of interest and development and not necessarily their achievement levels in comparison to their peers (Davilla & Koenig, 1998).

Next, teacher preparation and practice may represent another factor that hinders the success of the REA in the US (New, 2009). In a RE classroom, two teachers work "36 hours a week, including four or five hours of meetings to plan and conduct in-service training" (Palestis, 1994, p. 17) to implement professional development practices in the classroom, including observation and documentation. To successfully implement a similar practice in US classrooms, a regimen such as this would require a complete reorientation of US ECE, which is currently organized in such a way that each classroom is controlled by one teacher who determines, under the watchful eye of several educational administrations, how each class day unfolds, and how much time is devoted each day to which subject. This makes class time significantly more regimented than Italian RE classrooms (Palestis, 1994). Not only would such a change require a complete overhaul of current ECE practices in the US, it would also involve a serious commitment to campaigns to convince the greater public that such reforms are in their children's interests.

Finally, to ensure a successful implementation of the REA in ECE in the US, the US educational philosophy would need to become "driven from and . . . [not] separated from the image of the child, the nature of the learning process, the relationships with parents, and the





other fundamentals of the approach” (Bredenkamp, 1993, p. 16). In other words, to avoid eventual conflict or failure, it is very important to take each educational context and culture into account before attempting to implement a radically new approach in any early childhood education.

### **Canada’s Experience in Adopting the REA:**

In Canada's Rainbow District in Ontario province, Wood, Thrall, and Parnell (2015) observed that the successful adoption of the REA required that the school board increase their understanding of this method’s core principles. The teacher at the center of this study did not plan her curriculum in advance of the school year; instead, by observing and exploring her students’ interests, she found that they wanted more involvement in movement and musical performance. Moreover, the children asked questions about bodies and motion and applied what they learned in these activities to other fields of study, such as science (Wood, Thrall, & Parnell, 2015).

Another important difference between current Canadian ECE approaches and the REA revolves around the classroom environment (Tarr, 2004). While observing a kindergarten science lesson, Tarr (2004) saw classroom walls filled with cards, words, numbers, a calendar, class rules, shapes, colors, and alphabets, all posted on the walls much higher than the children’s eye level. Moreover, Tarr (2004) wondered about the messages encoded in the extensive use of smiling cartoon figures and stereotyped designs and their pedagogical utility. Tarr (2004) explained that these kinds of classrooms are customary in Canadian early childhood classrooms. She contrasted that with the REA, which emphasizes that classroom walls should document the children’s projects to show how and what the children are learning and thinking, to provide the children with opportunities to create and design their classroom displays, and to encourage teachers to critically evaluate their classroom environments (Tarr, 2004). Similarly, in the research reported above, Wood, Thrall, and Parnell (2015) found that by closely observing the children’s activities and trusting in the children’s natural curiosity, the teachers in their study learned to create a classroom environment more in line with RE principles and more supportive of dynamic, effective learning.

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## **RE-inspired Early Childhood Education in China and Vietnam**

RE-inspired kindergartens and preschools have opened in Vietnam and in many large cities in China, including Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong (Dang, 2011; Lee, Tsang & Sheung, 2005; Tang, 2006; Zhao, Edwards, Youngquist & Xiong, 2003). At the start of the 21st century, the REA became a hot topic in China as a result of research there into how children learn best (Zhao et al., 2003), focusing especially on those methods that best suit both the children's as well as the community's needs (Lee, Tsang & Sheung, 2005). Chinese and Vietnamese societies have traditionally regarded children as small adults who can and must follow adult social rules and directions. Such a perspective undervalues a child's innate curiosity, playfulness, and creative ability. In addition, it involves no consideration of the importance of each child's individual needs and developmental level (Tang, 2006). Viewing the child anew as an active learner comes from the desire to change the "overly protective environments" in which these children are taught in China and Vietnam; such traditional classroom environments produce children that "lack independence and self-esteem" because teachers believe that learning is "just listening and copying" (Dang, 2011, p. 23-25).

When bringing RE to the Chinese context, the new cultural background and societal values and beliefs of China as compared to Italy must be taken into account (Zhao et al., 2003), a process Chinese researchers termed "blending West into East" (Zhao et al., 2003, p. 15). For instance, Lee, Tsang and Sheung (2005) completed a project with children in a RE-inspired kindergarten in Hong Kong about Chinese facial masks and their history while they were studying the broader subject of the Chinese opera. This example illustrates the many possibilities of how a RE-inspired project-based curriculum can be linked with the adopting society's culture, history, and values. Educators in China valued the project-based curriculum for the novel ways children could learn about their national culture. They came to view other RE principles, such as documentation of the children's learning process, and parents' collaboration and participation in their children's learning as important reforms as well (Dang, 2011; Lee, Tsang & Sheung, 2005).

Chinese and Vietnamese educators asserted that the key to a successful linkage of the REA to a national culture and unique social context is teacher training and education so that teachers get practice



implementing the REA's core tenets (Early Childhood Curriculum Reform New Concept, 2004, as cited in Tang, 2006). Designing a holistic teacher training program is important for implementing a new Western educational approach to an Eastern context (Dang, 2011). However, Dang (2011) asserts that to train competent RE teachers, they would need more than six years of practice and application of the REA in order to change their internal teaching beliefs and practices. For this reason, educators in China and Vietnam follow three steps when training new teachers in the REA: "[Utilizing] combination and textualization, [developing a] long term plan, and [providing sufficient] teacher training and parent education" (Dang, 2011, p. 32). In their research, Zhao et al. (2003) designed a training program to introduce the REA to ECE teachers in China. One of the researchers remarked that, "on the first days of the training institute, I asked the teachers to engage in role reversal activities so that they could experience the way a child thinks and feels." As a result, "the teachers began to understand that the adult-child relationship can impact the child's perceptions of her environment, the people around her, and herself" (Zhao et al., 2003, p. 11). This example reflects the importance of teacher training and preparation.

Furthermore, this study's approach was, for Chinese educators, one of the most beneficial initial trials of the RE philosophy in another country because it was designed according to the children's needs, interests, and questions. The project themes utilized as teaching tools there were reflective of the children's perceptions of the things surrounding them. Such projects helped them prepare for more challenging learning experiences as they proceeded through primary school, high school, and university. It allowed students to do so more independently as they grew more accustomed to using projects as a vehicle for learning (Tang, 2006).

However, researchers from China and Vietnam did identify several elements that hamper ECE reform in these two countries. First, few teachers, parents, and school administrators knew about the REA and had to be convinced of its utility. This entailed meetings and conferences to educate the parents and administrators, and educational, and practical programs to inspire, train, and prepare teachers. (Dang, 2011). For this reason, Dang (2011) handpicked the Chinese and Vietnamese participants because they had already had some

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experience working with the REA. Second, the large class sizes and low teacher-child ratio hindered its implementation. (Zhao et al., 2003). Third, many schools that adopted the REA called their curriculum RE-inspired because they believed that “applying all REA features would be highly mismatched with their current contexts,” which led them to “believe that REA as a whole was a luxurious philosophy, which would be too expensive for them to adopt” (Dang, 2011, p. 26). Finally, Chinese and Vietnamese education systems highly value measurements of academic performance through testing and outcomes. Such a rigid view of education frequently results in the closure of a kindergarten or preschool if outcomes are deemed too low. Further, accepting a government-prescribed curriculum and “passive learner mindset and the traditional image of the child, which are a contrary to the REA, [are] ingrained in [citizens of these Asian nations] culturally,” and this is at direct odds with several core principles of the REA (Dang, 2011, pp. 30-31).

### **Implementing the REA in South Africa:**

The story of a group of parents in Italy who, with their own hands, built and established the People’s Nursery School in Villa Cella, inspired the South African educators Browne and Hugo (2014) to start the first RE-inspired school in Johannesburg in 2008 (Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance, 2018). In 2008, they participated in the Reggio Children International Study Group in which they started to consider “the influence this extraordinary approach to early education could have on the realization of children’s rights in South Africa” (Browne & Hugo, 2014, p. 10). They were encouraged by the reality that some South African children’s rights to a quality education were in need of protection. Thus, they visited some of the RE centers in Italy and attended workshops about the RE philosophy there to better understand the approach. They wanted to build these schools as a way to challenge the South African government to begin to ensure all South African children regain their human rights through RE implementation in ECE (Browne & Hugo, 2014).

At the time, ECE centers in South Africa were facing a number of challenges, including limited school supplies and teaching resources, limited parental engagement with their children’s schools and teachers, large class sizes, and pervasive poverty. In addition, some early childhood institutions were hiring teachers who lacked any professional qualification and training. (Browne & Hugo, 2014). For this reason, these educators were interested in providing teachers with



ongoing professional development workshops (Browne, 2015). The members of the Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (AREA), a nonprofit company, worked toward sending a group of teachers to attend the Reggio Children International Study Group taking place in Italy in 2012, 2013, and 2014 (Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance, n.d.). These efforts were aimed at enhancing the teachers' understanding of the RE philosophy and shifting their educational practices to conform to the REA (Browne & Hugo, 2014). Moreover, Browne and Hugo (2014) believed that the community collaboration and involvement principle of the RE philosophy was its most important component. They were convinced these goals could be achieved by educating parents about the REA and motivating them to engage in activities, such as helping renovate the school's playground, for example.

According to Browne and Hugo (2014), in 2011, the African Reggio Emilia Alliance (AREA) became part of the Reggio Children International Network and in 2014, around 1,800 people from South Africa participated in four international REA conferences (Browne, 2015; Browne & Hugo, 2014). This is strong evidence that adopting the REA in South Africa was successful and made a remarkable change in the lives of the children living and learning there, because educators could adjust the methods to account for the cultural and socioeconomic divides dominant in South Africa. Hugo (2014) stated that through her journey in implementing the REA in South Africa, she "envisage[d] the difference that the approach could make to the realization of children's rights to quality education" (Browne & Hugo, 2014, p. 15). In sum, the REA helped South Africa's educators view children as "agents of their own learning" through the use of questioning and exploration to construct meaning of their world (Brown, 2015, p. 42). Improving ECE by adopting the REA also helped improve collaboration and community involvement and led to decreased hunger and sickness among the children (Browne & Hugo, 2014).

### **Importing the REA into Arab Countries: Kuwait**

After attending a 2012 Reggio Emilia International Conference in Kuwait, educators from the region decided to make changes in their approach to teaching and the learning process (Alhashel, 2012). According to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), in 2015, Kuwaiti educators developed a five-year plan to complete the adoption and

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establishment of the REA in ECE. The five-year plan was divided into six stages; the first stage occurred in 2010, when a group called the Kuwait Society for the Advancement of Arab Children (KSAAC), in partnership with the Kuwait Ministry of Education, decided to plan a trip to RE schools in Italy. The goal was to investigate the possibilities of adopting it in Kuwait to better understand RE methods and principles, and to build bridges of cooperation and communication between the two nations (KUNA, 2012).

In the next part of their implementation plan, in 2010, the KSAAC translated a book into Arabic that is fundamental to RE educators titled *The Hundred Languages for Children* (Alhashel, 2012). This created a rich resource that would now be available to any Arab teacher, educator, and student interested in the REA (Aljafar & Alomar, 2010).

The third stage of the adoption plan involved holding a national seminar in Kuwait titled “Reggio Emilia: A city that lives in a school” (Alhashel, 2012, p. 89). The purpose of the seminar was to examine the RE philosophy and its fundamental principles. Then, in 2012, the KSAAC organized the fourth stage of this adoption plan—an international conference about the RE experience in kindergartens and preschools. Educators from diverse backgrounds exchanged experiences and ideas regarding how best to accomplish the transfer of the REA to Kuwait’s ECE programs (Alhashel, 2012). The Italian RE educators had developed an expertise on the cultural and societal context in Kuwait and how it might affect the adoption of the REA (Alhashel, 2012). They visited preschools and kindergartens to help their Kuwaiti counterparts adopt the approach in ways that respected the policies of the Kuwait Ministry of Education (KUNA, 2012).

Eight preschools (for children from four months to three years old) and kindergartens (for three- to six-year-olds) were transformed in one year from traditional schools to models of the REA. (Alkandary, 2011). The number of RE schools in Kuwait grew to twelve by 2012 (Alkandary, 2011). Alkaldy (2012) reported that fourteen teachers were chosen to teach in RE schools in Kuwait; these educators were selected according to the type and quality of teaching skills each exhibited, including such factors as class management, student assessment, writing quality, English speaking skills, drawing ability, and photography skills (Alkandary, 2011).



The final stage of the Kuwaiti plan (KUNA, 2015) was called the evaluation process, and aimed to assess the experiences of all the stakeholders, and to discover any strengths and weaknesses before choosing whether to establish more RE classrooms (KUNA, 2015). The Kuwait News Agency (2015) reported that several educators from the Ministry of Education and the Kuwait University were to prepare periodic reports to make sure they achieved the intended goals with periodic assessments of the application process to be performed by teachers (Alkaldy, 2012).

However, there has as yet been no research reporting on these RE classrooms in Kuwait. Such research would enable all ECE educators, especially those working in an Arab or Middle Eastern context, to examine and analyze the most significant elements of the adjustment process. Thus, Almomani, Ihmeideh and Haroun (2011) reported that there is much less research about the REA in the Middle East than in Europe or the Americas.

### **Conclusion:**

After reviewing the literature, two important points were noticed. First, even though the REA borrowed its name from a small town in North Italy called Reggio Romana where the first little RE school opened, it has inspired ECE educators all over the world (Alnageeb, 2009; Alshawareb, 2012). Second, this approach, with extensive discussion, education, and planning, can lend itself remarkably well to assimilation by different societies and cultures (Inan, 2009). Due to its flexibility, the REA allows for the successful adoption by ECE programs in many countries around the world and makes it an attractive alternative approach to other novel ECE approaches (McCall, 2008).

It is vital for the success of any RE reform movement that all stakeholders understand the core principles of the REA. Designing a professional training program was an important part of many countries' plans to implement the REA in ECE. However, we have to accept and expect that the implementation process may require more than five years (Dang, 2011; KUNA, 2015). Reforming education policies, learning new teaching practices, changing the adopting community's beliefs and values regarding the interrelationships of children, teachers, parents, and the community's role in their

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children’s learning process—these are all concepts that require full discussion and consideration for this philosophy to take root and grow. People will need to modify their perspectives about how they see the child such that they view children as full members of the community with the same human rights as any adult to a quality education. The larger community will need to begin to recognize children as active in their own learning and not empty receptacles passively waiting for knowledge to fill their heads.

### **Recommendations for ECE Policy and Practice Reform and Adoption of the REA:**

Arab ECE has much to gain from a comprehensive examination of the REA. Any significant reform in this direction will require a thorough education and training program for teachers along with major realignments in the management of the system. It begins with changing the view of the child as a passive learner to one that views the child as an active participant in learning. As Inan and Kayir (2015) stated, in any ECE approach, such as the one “inspired from Reggio Emilia, there is no true or wrong way for the education of young children, but understanding children and adapting the [Reggio] principles to your own world with your own realities” (p. 734) is necessary to bestow the new method with everything necessary to allow it to succeed outside Italy. However, adopting a new approach is difficult in the beginning and it can collide with the community’s educational orientation, philosophy, and beliefs. Clifford in Kagan and Kauerz (2012), suggests that education reformers “view building an early childhood system as an endeavor that demands slow, steady progress toward the vision. Change will come gradually, and perseverance over the long haul is essential. This work is not for the faint heart!” (p. 168–169).

I have in mind the same question that Palestis (1994) had when he explored the possibility of implementing the REA in the US: How much of this approach can be applied in Arab countries, keeping in mind that the Italian and Arab cultures are dramatically different? For this reason, I offer some recommendations for improving ECE in Arab countries while paving the way for the adoption of the REA.

- 1- Give the child’s curiosity and interest a lead in planning and designing the curriculum.





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- 2- Children's learning development can be assessed meaningfully.
  - 3- Expressions of learning that suit the religion and culture of Arab countries.
  - 4- Empower teachers to collaborate with children to design projects.
  - 5- Teachers and supervisors should refocus on the children.
  - 6- Translating REA resource materials into Arabic is necessary.
  - 7- Redesign existing kindergartens or transfer to better buildings.
  - 8- Educators should rethink the daily schedule.
  - 9- Begin to change the volunteering orientation of Saudi society.

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