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**THE REGGIO EMILIA  
EDUCATIONAL CONCEPT**

**Koncepcja edukacyjna Reggio Emilia**

Artykuł prezentuje koncepcję edukacyjną Reggio Emilia. Propozycja tej szkoły pojawiła się w północnych Włoszech w latach sześćdziesiątych ubiegłego wieku. Tekst uwypukla zwłaszcza rolę przestrzeni i znaczenie komunikacji w omawianej koncepcji edukacyjnej. W ujęciu tej propozycji dydaktycznej szczególne miejsce odgrywa środowisko, określane mianem „trzeciego nauczyciela”. Środowisko, któremu ta propozycja edukacyjna przypisuje szczególną rolę, zapewnia wszystkim zainteresowanym stronom możliwości wielu interakcji i rozmaite sposoby wzajemnej komunikacji. Koncepcja Reggio Emilia umożliwia ponadto realizację dydaktycznej zasady pedagogiki słuchania. Idea udziału tej zasady w procesie wychowania przedszkolnego, z uwagi na istotne procesy autonomizacji i indywidualizacji, odgrywa w koncepcji Reggio Emilia kluczową rolę.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Reggio Emilia, przestrzeń, „trzeci nauczyciel”, pedagogika słuchania

**Introduction**

In the education of younger children there is a large number of principles or concepts that place various values, principles, and premises in the forefront. One

of the more recent, alternative, postmodern educational concepts is the Reggio Emilia one. It was developed in Italy and has to date spread into many countries around Europe and in America.

The Reggio Emilia approach to education is a modern concept of preschool education, the aim of which is to educate children into critical thinkers and guardians of democracy. It is based on human and child's rights, democratic values, and the rule of law, and advocates conceptual integration of various sciences. A hallmark of the philosophy of Reggio Emilia is the fact that childhood is seen as a socially constructed concept; and in accordance with this children and teachers are co-creators of knowledge and society. Rinaldi believes preschools and schools should be public and for everyone. She is concerned about preschools and schools based on segregation such as division according to religion and gender<sup>1</sup>.

### **Theoretical foundations**

Today the Reggio Emilia approach is one of the pedagogical concepts of education in early childhood resulting from the legacy of John Dewey. With its reflections the latter influenced Western education. He wrote much about education and democracy from a broader perspective<sup>2</sup>. Table 1 shows a comparison of individual elements of Dewey's views of education with Reggio Emilia educational concept.

The bases of Reggio Emilia approach were designed in the sixties of the past century in northern Italy in the region Emilia Romagna. In 1963 a preschool was opened in Reggio Emilia, which was based on the pedagogical principles of democracy and developing critical thinking. The method thus experienced a boom and the municipality of Reggio Emilia asked Loris Malaguzzi to lead educational work in the nursery and to be the protagonist of their ideas<sup>3</sup>. The greatest interest in the concept, however, emerged in 1983, when children from the preschools in Italian town of Reggio Emilia presented their products (paintings, drawings, statues, models, photographs, projects displayed on billboards...) at an exhibition in Stockholm. The products of children prompted the attention of professional, of cultural and general public. The exhibition then circumvented the world. The Reggio Emilia approach is now being introduced in the work with preschool children in many parts of the world, for example in Sweden and in America.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Dyrfjord, *Primerjava praks v zvezi z demokracijo v vzgoji in izobraževanju v zgodnjem otroštvu*, "Sodobna pedagogika" 2006, No. 5, p. 110–122.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

Table 1. Comparison of Dewey's views with Reggio Emilia approach

CONCEPT	DEWEY	REGGIO EMILIA
IMAGE OF CHILD	Child is the creator of her or his meanings – an individual. As a whole being.	Child is able and predicts her or his own life. He or she is part of society. As a whole being.
ORIGIN	Social democracy.	Origin in socialism.
TEACHER'S ROLE	Defining the environment and organising opportunities for learning.	Co-creator of knowledge and the curriculum. Environment is seen as the third teacher.
CURRICULUM	Open and designed in accordance with experience and activities.	Chaotic, emerging and open. It emerges on the basis of children's questions and experiences (PD).
SOCIAL CULTURAL CONCEPT	Relevant.	Relevant.
SOCIAL ROLE	Relevant.	Children are part of community. Interdependence is valued.
CHILD'S OWN CULTURE		Relevant.
CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES	Probable.	Partly probable – in a definite framework (blindness for gender).
CITIZENSHIP	Child is emerging citizen.	Child is emerging citizen.
RESPONSIBILITY		Evaluation in the form of documenting.
ACCESS		The role of society is to allow access for all, which is partly paid through taxes.

## Problem

The Reggio Emilia approach is based on the premises of the child as a co-creator of knowledge, learning environment and educational plan, where the environment is considered as the third teacher. Identifying the child's otherness and his or her competence is, according to Malaguzzi, strengthening "the child's sense of her or his own identity through recognition peers and adults make possible to the extent that everyone can feel sufficient sense of belonging and self-reliance to be involved in preschool activities. This is the way in which children are provided expansion of communication networks and mastering of and respect for the language at all levels and contextual uses"<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> R. Kroflič, *Novi pristopi k spodbujanju otrokovega prosocialnega in moralnega razvoja v predšolskem obdobju*, "Posvet vzgojiteljic Celjske regije, Socialne interakcije v vrtcu", 27 September 2008, Retrieved 18 May 2009, from: <http://www2.arnes.si/~rkrofl1/Teksti/vzgojiteljice%20Celje%202008.doc>, p. 29.

The purpose of the paper is to present the *role of space and interaction and communication* with emphasis on the *pedagogy of listening* in Reggio Emilia approach.

### Research questions

Is the space a “third teacher” in the preschool environment?

What is communication and interaction and the pedagogy of listening in preschool?

### Methodology

It is a theoretical work based on descriptive method of educational research.

### Results and Discussion

#### *Space as the third teacher in preschool environment*

In preschools of Reggio Emilia there is a high degree of awareness of what their environment teaches the children and it is often referred to as “the third teacher”. The environment reflects the school background of Dewey’s philosophy and Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory. The teachers in the preschool of Reggio Emilia firmly believe children are resourceful, curious, able, and inventive, and that they wish to communicate among them and with other children. They believe children can best create meaning and give sense to their world by living in rich space that supports diversity, continuity, and changing relationships among people. They prefer a world full of experiences and ideas and of various opportunities for expressing these ideas to simplifying lessons or learning environment. They believe also children have the right to environment that stimulates their development of many languages. A comprehensive and well illustrated discussion of the importance of environment in the preschool environment of Reggio Emilia can be found in the work authored by Ceppi and Zini *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children*<sup>5</sup>. The book describes the depth to which the environment stimulates educational and cultural values of schools and of the community. It presents the belief children have the right to be educated in carefully created environment. In the preschools of Reggio Emilia the children learn to evaluate their rich visual heritage and to become visually aware through the incentives of the environment built for multi-sensory learning.

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<sup>5</sup> *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children*, eds. G. Ceppi, M. Zini, Reggio Children and Domus Academy Research Center 1998.

In the Reggio Emilia concept no space may be marginal and no space unimportant, every corner must be alive and sensitive to change.

In discussing the preschools in Reggio Emilia, their circumstances are the following:

- The same way as everyday work in preschool represents the microcosm of society, also many elements of the town and activities of the town are included in the life of children.
- The preschool itself is thus not open in terms of activities and plans or timetables, but in terms of characteristics of the space itself (both functional and aesthetic)<sup>6</sup>.

The preschools of Reggio Emilia are designed to allow the children in them as much movement as possible. The arrangement of spaces allows children to be present and to be independent everywhere, including in the kitchen. Preschools are divided into characteristic, practical, and recognisable “zones” or areas<sup>7</sup>.

There is great care about what the environment teaches. The shape of the preschool reflects the structure of the community. Preschools represent different ages and architectural styles; every school, however, is built around the “piazza” i.e. the square that represents the main town squares. So the “piazza” is not just a place we walk through to arrive somewhere, but has the function of meeting point for children from different classes and represents a comfortable space for meetings of parents and teachers<sup>8</sup>. The children meet here, play, make friendships, and talk. The square is the heart of the preschool and from here other rooms can be accessed<sup>9</sup>.

The teachers in the Reggio Emilia preschool integrate the image of home into preschool: vases with flowers, various dishes, tablecloths and plants. Attention is dedicated to shaping and placing objects in the way they will take care of visually pleasant environment. Strong influence of art in Italian culture is clearly visible in the space of artistic atelier (studio). Small ateliers are situated in immediate vicinity of each playroom and the role of atelier (art teacher) is to support teachers and children in their work<sup>10</sup>.

In children the atelier arouses great interest. On shelves plastic boxes and glasses are distributed with objects in them which children need in their work: colours, chalk, crayons, brushes, glue, and a lot more. The atelier encourages children to exploring, as they can find a clock, an overhead projector, a microscope, a telephone, rulers, a meter, a small computer in it. Here also materials that introduce children to nature can be found: animal hides, a bird nest, bird feathers,

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<sup>6</sup> P. Tarr, *Aesthetic Codes in Early Childhood Classrooms*, “Art Education” 2001.

<sup>7</sup> R. Padovan, *Razmišljanje o drugačni vlogi vzgojitelja v vrtcu*, “Otrok in družina” 1995, Year 44, No. 7/8, pp. 14–17.

<sup>8</sup> P. Tarr, *Aesthetic Codes...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> R. Padovan, *Razmišljanje o drugačni...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> P. Tarr, *Aesthetic Codes...*, *op. cit.*

dried starfish, seashell and a lot more. The supply of natural materials is large and it is arranged in the way it is always close to children's hands. Children can always take everything and also use it; such confidence is extremely valued by children. Children's activities are carefully considered and this is why there is little waste. Sometimes the atelier is so inviting children even give up play in open air and spend most of the day in this room<sup>11</sup>.

The zone for the development of motorics is open and spacious; its equipment includes a soft carpet with two big cushions and a low ladder. In this room a lot of ropes of different thicknesses and lengths can be found, then tubes that are or are not transparent or flexible, boxes of different dimensions, balls, ribbons, panels, skittles, spinning tops, etc. This room is suitable for group play and children's research. It continues into the "zone of large constructions" that includes two stages covered with industrial rubber. The material for play is arranged in little boxes that can be carried around. Toys can be found here that serve orientation in space, toys for plastic creation, a puppet theatre... On the wall there is a large mirror, which allows children to observe themselves during movement, to follow the movement of the group and to compare them among themselves. In this room parents often join their children in playing<sup>12</sup>.

Children also need "hidden zones" or corners that are protected so they can stay in them with a smaller group of friends or alone. This can be a "little burrow", a little house, a kitchen, musical or reading corner, where there are also personal areas. These personal areas are little boxes with an opening, so the child can use them as personal space in the preschool. Here personal objects and messages that travel the distance home – preschool are kept. One could say these are child's hidden treasures, and the author<sup>13</sup> estimates children value them very highly.

In the structure of preschool also the kitchen occupies an important position. Every preschool namely has its own kitchen, which is not equipped very luxuriously. Also the kitchen staff are involved in the education process. If children wish so, they can help prepare meals or setting tables, they can peel fruits and clean vegetables, they can also touch small household appliances and large dishes they do not have at home. Children are curious beyond gratification and in their curiosity they ask a lot of questions on the ways of preparing something, what they will have for lunch, what they like and what they do not. They also often observe the cook in her work and they often arrive at various conclusions. To encourage children to socialise also outside their groups, rooms are connected with passages, windows, and telephones.

The walls within preschools keep the history of life in the form of documentation panels composed of children's words and pictures that connect past and chronologically contemporary projects. Children's work and their words are

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<sup>11</sup> R. Padovan, *Razmišljanje o drugačni...*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

clearly visible within space that clearly communicates the children, the parents, and the community the message of respect for children's values, skills and potentials with creating another form of transparency and osmosis between school and the surrounding community<sup>14</sup>.

### **Interaction and communication and the pedagogy of listening**

Malaguzzi says in Reggio Emilia preschools teachers follow children, not plans. In this they are assisted by knowledge, experiments, research, documentation and examples that show success and failure. The goals are important indeed, but even more important is why and how they are attained<sup>15</sup>.

Teachers are in the role of learners who through observing children are supposed to learn from them how to adapt learning material for them. Teachers must adapt to children's way of thinking and become just guides of children's thinking without imposing ideas and beliefs of adults upon them. This is the reason why teachers do not use manuals, do not follow the curriculum and the children do not solve knowledge tests. The task of the teachers is primarily to take records of or to audiotape conversations among children while children are becoming acquainted with the environment<sup>16</sup>.

The task of teachers is also to shape the environment that supports children's activity and encourages their creativity: therefore the suitable time, space, materials, climate and opportunities. They must allow the children enough time, as creativity does not know the limitations of time. Neither may they be moved, e.g. from one room into another to finish their product there. While children are creating, we cannot require silence, orderliness of room and cleanliness from them, they must be allowed freedom; we must clearly show them novelties and errors are accepted.

In the course of planning activities the teacher reflects together with children on what they could do the next day or whether to continue the activities of the particular day. What they are going to do in future depends to a large extent on what children are interested in. Thus also the planning of activities is constantly about mutual cooperation and respect for opinions, interests and desires of children. In this, communication is crucial<sup>17</sup>.

*The pedagogy of listening* represents one of the practical approaches to education that takes account of the principle of acknowledging the child as competent being. From the perspective of ethical arguments the pedagogy of listening

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<sup>14</sup> P. Tarr, *Aesthetic Codes...*, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> E. Dolar Bahovec, K. Bregar Golobič, *Šola in vrtec skozi ogledalo*, Ljubljana 2004.

<sup>16</sup> I. Kreft, *Otrok kot ustvarjalec kulture, vrednosti in pravic – vzgojni pristop mesta Reggio Emilia*, „Razvojnaja psihologija” 1980, No. 4, pp. 46–48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

has to date been the most convincingly substantiated by S. Todd while in practice being the most comprehensively developed in Reggio Emilia concept. Rinaldi describes the significance of listening from the perspective of developmental psychological argumentation:

The desire for finding the sense of life and of self is born together with the child. This is why we speak about the child who is competent and strong, about the child who is seen as active subject. For us these child's clarifying theories are extremely important for discovering the ways how the child thinks, questions, and explains reality...

The same as for adults to understand means to be able to develop an interpretative theory, a narration that gives meaning to events and objects in the world. Our theories are temporary and can be constantly changed while simultaneously representing more than just an idea or a cluster of ideas. They must namely satisfy us and convince, they must be applicable and satisfy our intellectual, affective and aesthetic needs (aesthetics of knowledge). When presenting the world, our theories represent ourselves. Moreover, if possible, our theories must also satisfy and excite others... Our theories must be listened by others. This allows transformation of the world: my knowledge and identity are also created through intervention of the other. Mutual listening to theories is a response to (existential) insecurity and loneliness...<sup>18</sup>.

In the Reggio Emilia approach the concept of pedagogy of listening has developed through educational documenting. This is a tool developed for examination of child's learning and thinking. It is based on documenting and explaining child's conduct. It allows pedagogues to reflect on experiences with children, parents and with others from wider society and to integrate them into the whole picture<sup>19</sup>. It is thus about a turn in the conceptualisation of the role of the adult in relation to the child that reflects in requiring the kind of educational context in which the adult: in the process of child's learning listens (literally) and pays attention (metaphorically = follows) to child's construction of concepts and images, their interpretations of the world, explanations and "theories"; further, creates opportunities for a variety of ways of child's expression and mental representation; enables children expression of their own views of preschool and experiences, expectations and ideas and provides for co-decision in matters that concern their life in preschool. The political aspect of pedagogy of listening sets the requirement for democratic dialogue of preschool and teachers with families, local community and its culture.

## Conclusion

On the basis of what has been said we can conclude the Reggio Emilia educational concept sets the child in the focus. Accordingly, children are co-creators and active creators of knowledge and society. The activities in preschool are therefore

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<sup>18</sup> R. Kroflič, *Novi pristopi...*, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> K. Dyrfjord, *Primerjava praks...*, op. cit.

based on child's agility, engagement, interests, and desires. Much attention is dedicated to the development of identity of each individual child. The child appears as a unique subject with her or his rights and not just with specific needs.

The authors of the Reggio Emilia concept have accepted the thought as the premise that each child is born with a hundred languages, but rather quickly only one remains, because the other ninety-nine are neglected and are not developed. In this context they therefore encourage all forms of expression such as movement, colour, drawing, puppet, music, speech, rhythm and allow children to express their relation to self and to others, to nature, space and time in which they live in various ways. The concept is namely based on the attitude children should never be taught something they are not able to learn by themselves. Emphasised is the significance of quality communication and interaction in the form of socialising, connecting, cooperation among all stakeholders in the educational process.

All the elements stated above are also implemented in Reggio Emilia preschool with the support of adequate organisation of environment in preschool. The Reggio Emilia preschool is namely the space that allows contacts between adults and children and represents the environment, in which everybody, both children and teachers and parents feel well. This is why they say space is the third teacher.

Reggio Emilia approach, which is not static, constantly grows and develops. The values and insights of this educational approach are always part of a wider cultural context, which points to the embeddedness of preschool in the culture of the environment. It means the institutions with such approach are always part of the place and that the place is a basic part of these institutions. An important finding is the child is the one education emerges from, with the diversity of children and their rights being in the forefront. In the area of child's expression and communication the finding is important, the discussed concept consciously encourages the development of all forms of child's expression. Besides, the importance of quality communication and cooperation among all participants of the education process is highlighted. Also essential for child's development is teamwork of teachers and of other preschool staff. For the development of child's motor, cognitive and socialisation abilities space needs to be constructed in the way both internal and external facilities are adequately arranged in it, providing for adequate variegation of choice of materials and toys. The supporters of Reggio Emilia concept are aware the environment teaches the child, so they have endeavoured to create such environment that primarily stimulates child's creativity, diversity of expression and visual awareness. Because advocating the priority of learning before teaching the arrangement of spaces is such to allow children participation and independence in all spaces. Preschools are divided into characteristic "zones", among which the "piazza" or square, which allows gathering of children from different age groups and of their parents, and the atelier, where children develop their creative potential, are the most in the forefront. Preschool

is directly involved in the cultural and social life and family life. In the work and play all relevant cultural aspects, such as art and pop culture, are included.

According to Carla Rinaldi (2007) the pedagogy of listening is defined as the ethics and method of education based on postmodern views of childhood and education, in which the idea of the competent child and the idea of participation as a principle of democratic preschool education play the central role<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> C. Rinaldi, *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: listening, researching and learning*, Routledge, London–New York 2007.