

## The Early Years Curriculum

*"Only by listening to the questions (verbal and non-verbal) children ask we will be able to develop the perfect curriculum."*

*Griffiths R. (1935)*

*This report has been set out to demonstrate a range of theories and their philosophy on four different curricular approaches, being: Reggio Emilia, Montessori, Steiner and Forest schools. As every child is unique, there are a number of factors that influence a child's learning. This report will discuss how these approaches have influenced current best practice, meeting every child's needs by having an effect on the curricular guidance in the UK. It will also make recommendations for development in the setting I work in, enabling effective learning and positive interaction, focusing on issues relating to inclusion and anti-discriminatory practice in order to provide them with equal opportunities that will create holistic development.*

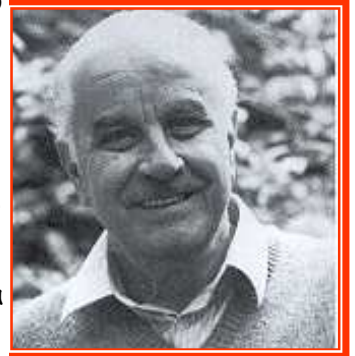
*As development occurs rapidly during the early years, every stage of development should control the learning they are offered, meeting each child's needs. Early year's settings should focus on promoting care and learning opportunities for young children making it stimulating and rewarding. All the four approaches have taken into account that children's brains thrive on stimulation and new experiences, and play can extend children's development and learning. The findings of the EPPE project also suggest, that it is not enough to create a stimulating environment and simply let children play, as children learn best when staff actively teach them. This means modelling appropriate language and behaviour, sharing intelligent conversations, asking open-ended questions and using play to motivate and encourage them.*

*The early year's curriculum is based on key theories of how children learn and current early years practice has grown out of the work of early years educators. By incorporating their ideas into forming the curriculum, early year's settings encourage learning through first-hand experience. We will look into the four approaches and see how they have been embedded into the Early Years Foundation Stage by setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five.*



# Reggio Emilia

Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) was the educational thinker who guided and inspired the 'Reggio Emilia' approach in the Reggio Romagna region of Northern Italy. The approach requires children to be seen as competent, resourceful, curious, imaginative, inventive, and possess a desire to interact and communicate with others. Dr Loris Malaguzzi helped us understand that children shouldn't be expected to all have the same ways of expressing themselves, so he put forth the idea that there are 100 languages or ways of learning (paint, clay, music, drama, cooking, etc) in which expression and learning can take place.



The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education has been adopted in USA, UK, New Zealand, Australia and many other countries. The Reggio Emilia method is made possible through a carefully articulated and collaborative approach to the care and education of young children and has also influenced Te Wariki in New Zealand. Reggio is a way of thinking about how young children learn and is based on the philosophies of Dewey and Vygotsky that is a very large idea with many parts, not a curriculum that can be adopted and implemented. Malguzzi used this versatility of research and theory recognising the contributions to Reggio's thinking by the great educators: Vygotsky, Piaget and Jerome Bruner and this concept is brought about in the Early Years Foundation Stage-Every Child Matters Framework. As stated by Bruner, (1995) "We are researching children researching their world."

Some of the key principles of Reggio are:

- ④ Giving the child more autonomy.
- ④ The Image of the Child.
- ④ Education based on interaction and collaboration.
- ④ The importance of time.
- ④ The role of the environment.
- ④ The role of the teacher.
- ④ The role of parents, as it is all learning together.



Some of the key features of Reggio Emilia's early childhood programme are:-

- ④ The environment is referred to as the "third teacher".
- ④ The aesthetic beauty is an important part of respecting the child and their learning environment.
- ④ Children's work and collections are displayed; at the children's and adult eye level.
- ④ The piazza and the atelier are at the heart of the preschool centre.
- ④ Documenting and displaying are unique and is viewed as an important tool in the learning process.
- ④ Learning and teaching are reciprocal processes.
- ④ The teacher's role is complex; as the teacher is seen as a reflective researcher and they stay with their class from the time they start to when they leave.
- ④ The children are seen as capable and inquisitive adults.



Programs in Reggio are family centred. Loris's vision of an "education based on relationships" supports children's reciprocal relationships with other children, family, teachers, society, and the environment. Reggio approach is not a formal model with defined methods (such as Waldorf and Montessori), teacher certification standards and authorization. But, the educators in Reggio Emilia speak of their evolving "experience" and see themselves as a provocation and reference point, a way of engaging in dialogue starting from a strong and rich vision of the child.

As cited by Brown,N (2004) "According to the documentation produced in Reggio Emilia pre-schools it would appear that girls and boys tend to work in single-sex groups. Girls also prefer smaller groups than do boys, and girls tend to discuss and collaborate from the start rather than, as the boys do, work independently before working collaboratively." This

suggests that there are differences between boys and girls which appears to start from the premise itself. There seems to be a view that these differences are rather accepted and nothing can be done about it except document them and accommodate the differences in future projects. This also gives an impression that Reggio educators view these differences as natural. Many who have reflected on gender issues in the 'Reggio approach' have felt awkward about the lack of critical thought about observed gender differences. Practitioners should ponder on this difference and ensure that their provision supports gender equity.

In a nutshell, the Reggio approach articulates children to acquire skills of critical thinking and collaboration. It is a prism, a crystal, for seeing all the things we have looked at: relationships with families, curriculum, time management, evaluation, etc. and it isn't something one can apply. It is an approach to thinking about programs for young children and accepting children from all walks of life; where children with special needs are given first preference, making it totally inclusive. The Bristol standard aims at promoting the concept of reflective practitioners where they can become part of a process that protects and celebrates the wonder of early childhood through well informed and reflective practice. All preschool operators ought to benchmark against the Reggio Emilia school.



# Steiner Education

As children are developing physically, mentally and emotionally, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) believed that education should be designed to meet their changing needs, helping a child to accomplish their full potential in overall development and learning, as well as academic progress. His technique was systematic, and was based on his own wide experience as a tutor and on his study of 'spiritual science'.



Edmunds (1979), portrays Steiner Education with these inspiring words "To educate youth... is to ennoble the mind, to fire the imagination, to fortify the will and to quicken initiative for life." Waldorf nurseries all around the world endeavour to meet the needs of each individual child with the utmost care, providing a harmonious home life which children should enjoy up to the age of five or six, working with Rudolf Steiner's key points which are:

- ④ Encouraging play, drawing, story telling, environment study and natural things up to the age of seven.
- ④ Children younger than seven should not be taught to read.
- ④ Teaching a child to write before teaching them to read.
- ④ Allowing only one teacher to teach the same class for seven years. (This concept is taken from Reggio Emilia).
- ④ Letting the child focus on one subject at a time.
- ④ Find links between subjects like art and science.
- ④ Connect with the child to make sure that they are keen about the material being taught.
- ④ Showing the child good values but not enforcing a specific set of beliefs.
- ④ Encouraging knowledge for its own sake and not just working towards exams.
- ④ Allowing children to work at their own pace to ease their learning "as each child has its own tempo and thrives best when this is allowed for." (Edmunds, F. 1979: p22).



Rudolf Steiner made specific curriculum suggestions for all subjects including handwork, gymnastics, painting, music, shorthand and many others. A Teacher was given the freedom to build up the curriculum according to his own perspective. In a Steiner pre-school, no formal schooling takes place but there is an ordered life in the way children are received and engaged in activities.

"There is an extreme case of a general and widespread tendency today to intellectualize children without counting the costs. *By robbing the life of children we are stultifying the life of adults.*" (Edmunds, F. 1979: p23)

There is too much emphasis on getting small children to read and write at an early age which leaves them little or no time to play. This gives vent to frustration making them incapable human beings unable to solve problems and to make compromises as adults. Rudolf Steiner realised the fact that premature educational demands on the child, sap the life forces needed for further development later. He was also not in favour of sitting children in front of the television or a computer as there was much more to be learnt by doing things practically and get first hand experience. According to Steiner, "creative, imaginative forces spring from a healthy life of will like flowers from a meadow; they are crippled by 'clever' toys invented by clever adults." (Edmunds, F. 1979: p24). The objects of play in Steiner schools are simple so that the child can dress them with his or her own imagination as a child sees everything to be alive and real.



Even today Steiner schools exist, and they are distinctly different from other schools. In the 1970s, 80s and 90s, United Kingdom and other parts of the world saw the formation of new Steiner Schools. Its founder was so self-motivated that everyone concerned knows that he would not have allowed his school to stay as it was, but would have found new and creative ways to meet the changing needs of present times. Nowadays it seems difficult for the people involved to know what course to take, without losing the essence of education that was brought to the world by Rudolf Steiner.



# Montessori

"Education must no longer be regarded only as a matter of teaching children, but as a social question of the highest importance, because it is the one question that concerns all mankind." (Montessori M, date unknown)

Born in Italy in 1870, Maria Montessori moved to Rome with her parents in 1875 at the age of five. Maria Montessori is often referred to as "ahead of her time". Throughout her life Maria Montessori had a particular interest in the development of children, especially those with special needs. She learned from the work of others, but evolved her own theories and believed that 'the child was a truly miraculous being' and later on Steiner adopted this fact from Montessori. In 1906, Maria Montessori founded the first "Children's House". Montessori discovered how naturally young children adapted and enjoyed learning everyday tasks. The Montessori Method focuses on the individuality of each child in respect of their needs or talents as its goal is to help the child maintain their natural joy of learning.



Some of the inventions of Maria Montessori are:-

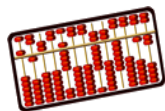
- ④ Sand paper alphabets and the Spinda boxes.
- ④ Phonics; this has been taken up by the National Curriculum.
- ④ Furniture and equipment scaled down to the child's size.
- ④ Encourages independence and freedom with limits and responsibility.
- ④ "Practical life" skills: domestic skills and manners are emphasized with the goal of increasing attention spans, hand-eye coordination, and tenacity.

The structure of work and constructive activity gives the children a sense of self-worth that they have never experienced before. The Montessori approach does not emphasise play or the free flow of ideas, neither are the children allowed to undertake creative activities until they have worked through all the graded learning activities. Montessori believed in the "natural unfolding of the child's intelligence" that follows a specific path which must be aided by the adult by observing, as she did not believe in forced learning by children.

*"When young children feel confident their energy for curiosity and exploration is considerable... If to the children the practitioner feels detached or remote- not like a secure base- then their energy and curiosity is very reduced or disappears." Elfer (1996). Montessori did not think there was a need for adult 'correction' and little parental involvement was encouraged. This concept would go against the principles of Vygotsky, who identified the 'zone of proximal development' emphasising on the role of adults to intervene and help children learn, moving into the 'zone of actual development' as adults provide the 'intellectual scaffolding' to help children learn and progress through the different stages of development.*

*The Montessori Method does not see children as part of a community, but are made to work largely on their own in a peaceful environment of total concentration. Current mainstream practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework has not accepted this philosophy as it would not usually leave children to work through activities on their own. According to Lillard, P (1996) the Montessori theory is to adapt education for each developmental stage through materials especially designed for a child's exploration and self-discovery, encouraging children to be active rather than passive learners at all levels. This has been acknowledged by the recent curricular guidance and some Montessori materials and ideas are used, for example, graded sizes of particular shapes, such as small, medium, and large blocks. The Montessori theory allows children to acquire the skills to answer their own questions, learn to manage freedom with responsibility, and maintain a high level of intellectual curiosity. Its teaching; aims for the fullest possible development of the whole child, ultimately preparing him for life's many rich experiences.*

*Maria Montessori realised that children pass through sensitive periods of development early in life, and said that "education starts from birth". This is now recognised by the Early Years Foundation Stage. Dr. Montessori described the child's mind between the time of birth and six years of age as the "absorbent mind" and has written a book about it. It is during this stage that a child has a tremendous ability to learn and assimilate from the world around him, without conscious effort. During this time, children are particularly receptive to certain external stimuli. A Montessori teacher recognizes and takes advantage of these highly perceptive stages through the introduction of materials and activities which are specially designed to stimulate the intellect.*

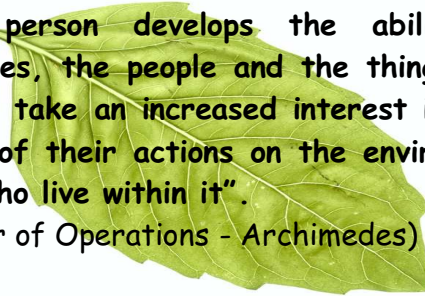




# Forest schools

"If a person develops the ability to respect themselves, the people and the things around them, they will take an increased interest in the long-term effects of their actions on the environment and the people who live within it".


(Director of Operations - Archimedes)



'Forest Schools is an innovative educational approach to outdoor play and learning.' It is a concept originally developed in Denmark for pre-school children (under seven years). The philosophy of Forest Schools is to encourage and inspire individuals of any age through positive experiences and participation in engaging and motivating achievable tasks and activities in a woodland environment, helping to develop personal, social and emotional skills which will lead to independence, self-discovery, confidence, communication skills and raised self-esteem. Each Forest School Site is unique, designed to meet the needs of the group making it inclusive. Children become comfortable with an outdoor approach to education and play in familiar surroundings. It allows a more child led outdoor curriculum with opportunities for projects to be taken back to the indoor setting to be continued.



Forest Schools have demonstrated success with children of all ages through the following methods:-

- ④ Learning takes place in the natural environment through play.
- ④ Use of own initiative to handle risks and solve problems.
- ④ Co-operate with others.
- ④ Programmes are held throughout the year in all weather s. 
- ④ Children use full sized tools, play, learn boundaries of behaviour; both physical and social, grow in confidence, self-esteem and motivation.
- ④ Use of tools in the wood promotes trust and self-confidence; it develops motor skills and fine motor skills.



As children need time to thoroughly explore their thoughts, feelings and relationships this method encourages them to understand the world, the environment and everything within it through use of their emotions, imagination and senses. This principle has been adopted from Reggio Emilia which considers the environment to be the 'third teacher'. Malguzzi (1996) "We place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security."

This ethos was introduced to the UK during the 1990's and has proved to be an effective educational tool in a variety of settings. Children attending Forest Schools were arriving at school with strong social skills, the ability to work in groups effectively, and generally children had high self-esteem and confidence in their own capabilities that proved to be an effective foundation and raised academic achievements. Since its introduction Forest Schools have developed opportunities in an outdoor setting for children of all ages to develop a variety of life skills.

- ④ Participants gain confidence in their own ability.
- ④ Kinaesthetic learners (learning by doing) are particularly suited to learning in this woodland outdoor environment.
- ④ It aims at meeting children's basic needs before any higher learning can take place.
- ④ Children feel safe both physically and emotionally as care is taken to ensure that children have proper clothing and footwear, healthy meals and plenty of hydrated water and hot drinks.

The Forest School sites are usually away from main entrances requiring the group to walk long distances and terrain, but all this depends on the abilities of the group. A hard surface approach may be necessary for wheel chairs and buggies making it as inclusive as possible. Each time the children leave the woods they take something with them to encourage parental interest and communicative interaction. All sessions are designed around the needs of the group, ensuring that they are learner-led. Sessions are designed around a theme, such as Romans, butterflies, spies, fairies or nature investigators.



Many areas of the National Curriculum are intrinsically covered in the Forest Schools Experience without the programmes needing to be curriculum led. The activities are set up involving the capabilities of every person within the group. Teamwork skills are developed through games and activities such as hide and seek, shelter building, tool skills, lighting fires or environmental art. Each activity develops intra and inter-personal skills as well as practical and intellectual skills. Activities are constantly evaluated and re-adjusted through out the day to meet each the group's requirements. The children may be asked to shout out, draw, act or play a game to review the day they have just experienced, reflecting about what they have done during the day. Individual's progress is observed/monitored and a thorough evaluation process is used to ensure that aims and objectives are being met.



# Conclusion

All the four approaches have in a way had an effect on forming the current curriculum, as all the approaches have one thing in common which is to 'meet the needs of the child'. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework has realised the need to provide the materials, opportunities, interactions and experiences that allow children to pursue their own interests and be creative. This is done by stimulating them through motivation but not overloading them with the things we want them to be interested in. The concept of supporting children's development through their interest has been outlined in Tender care and Early Learning from High Scope and is currently used by Birth to Three Matters focussing on children's strengths and interests. Reggio Emilia and Forest Schools provide models of excellence in developing high quality physical environment and this has been taken up by the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework. The Living, Loving and Learning exhibition (1999) and the British Association for Early Childhood Education explains the main principles and purpose of physical environment as it is essential in our work with young children that we consider the outdoors as a natural 'extension' of our indoor learning environment, as very young children need to be offered the opportunity to move and think freely. This is vital for their physical growth and development of their minds. Advancing children's physical and intellectual competence is the heart of much of the early childhood curriculum.

Montessori and Steiner do not use display boards to celebrate children's achievements and this would go against the principles of Reggio Emilia, who believe it to be an ideal way of communication with parents, who can view their children's experiences and learning on wall panels in the form of annotated photographs and displayed work. It is an important documentation inviting parents to feel close to their children's experiences in the setting. This approach has been considered by the setting and there are a number of display boards for different age groups.

Central to the work of Reggio Emilia, Montessori, Steiner and Forest Schools is the notion of inclusion of all children whatever their needs and backgrounds. In conclusion, according to Yousif, T (2000), "Like seeds, nourish children and they shall grow and bloom. "



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[www.reggiochildren.it](http://www.reggiochildren.it)

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