

# Adapting the Reggio Emilia Approach in Libraries

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After the devastation of World War II, the parents of the Italian city of Reggio Emilia came together with a plan to build early childhood schools that would foster rich learning environments and critical thinking for their children.

That philosophy, known as the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA), was developed in the mid-1940s and was groundbreaking due to its participative and collaborative nature among children, parents, and educators.

Parents sold abandoned tanks and horses left by Nazi soldiers and used the funds to build the schools with their own hands.<sup>1</sup>

In this way, parents became intimately involved and invested in their child's education, which remains to this day a particularly important dimension of the REA.

Esteemed local teacher Loris Malaguzzi joined the effort and would later be credited as the founder of the REA.<sup>2</sup> The REA continued to spread throughout Italy and the rest of Europe in the 1980s, and in 1991, the preschools of Reggio Emilia gained international acclaim as one of the top ten schools in the world by Newsweek.<sup>3</sup>

The REA continues to inspire educators worldwide, with new books and articles consistently being released on the topic. Yearly conferences and workshops abound, and teachers can join study groups to travel to Reggio Emilia and see the schools in person.<sup>4</sup> As the REA's popularity and reputation



A child's creative expression.

for being a "gold standard" for education continue to rise, it is worth asking if public libraries have anything to learn.<sup>5</sup>

Do the guiding principles of the REA transfer to a library environment, and can they enhance existing early childhood programming? This is the question I set out to answer. While public librarians may have used the REA, there is no clear documentation of it in the academic literature, and I located only one blog describing the use of the REA in libraries.<sup>6</sup> The following article will provide an overview of the core principles of the REA, a description of how I sought to apply them to a monthly library art program, and how the program was received, with a final exploration and assessment of the merit of the REA in public libraries.

## Literature Review

There is no definitive list of guiding principles of the REA. Some scholars identify twelve based on the writings of Loris



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Beautiful raindrops!

Malaguzzi, others use eight or nine.<sup>7</sup> This lack of definitive articulation is because the REA was never intended to be a replicable approach. It is constantly evolving and being adapted. Only schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, can be authentic REA schools. When adapted elsewhere, they are described as “Reggio-Inspired.”<sup>8</sup> Because the REA is intended to be guided by local environment and culture, replicating it verbatim in a different environment would immediately cause it to lose its value. Therefore, various disciplines and fields have sought to modify it to meet their unique goals and outcomes. While prevalent in the field of education, the REA has been adapted to the fields of music and disability research.<sup>9</sup> This is why it is called an “approach,” instead of a method, and what renders it a particularly intriguing approach to use in libraries.

For the sake of this literature review, I chose to highlight the nine guiding principles as identified by Lella Gandini in 2008 and linked to on the website of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA).<sup>10</sup> The NAREA is the leading authoritative body for REA practice in the United States. The principles are:

1. **The image of the child.** Children have rights. An educational environment should support the rights of children to learn, make decisions, and be contributing members of society.

2. **Children’s relationships and interactions within a system.** Children’s learning does not occur in isolation. It is immersed in a larger school and community system that should be examined, understood, and contributed to.
3. **The role of parents.** Parents are co-teachers and should be active participants in their child’s learning.
4. **The role of space.** The physical space where learning occurs should be welcoming and designed to foster communication and group work. The space should encourage discussion and exchanges.
5. **Teachers and children as partners in learning.** Children act as “researchers.” They pose questions and seek answers to them, instead of the answers being passively given to them.
6. **Not a preset curriculum but a process of inviting and sustaining learning.** Teachers use the feedback they receive from children to inform their curriculum.
7. **The power of documentation.** A child’s work is to be examined, studied, and valued. These “documents” are to be displayed and appreciated by all individuals in the school.
8. **The many languages of children and the atelier.** Learning should occur in an “atelier” (i.e., workshop) setting. The atelier is equipped with many materials to choose from that are readily available and easy to access. Children have many “languages” to express themselves, and teachers should provide the tools to facilitate the expression of those languages.
9. **Projects.** Projects provide a structure for learning and a format to encourage discussions and collaborative work.

## The Role of Art

The REA is highly visual in nature and often relies on student-driven art projects to create learning experiences. The open-ended nature of art enables what Malaguzzi named “a hundred languages” of creativity.<sup>11</sup> This artistic outlet creates a mode of communication for young children who are not yet fully competent in writing and speaking.<sup>12</sup> Children’s learning, he argued, is stifled by a lack of choices, or “languages” to speak. Being trusted with the ability to make choices through the use of materials activates a sense of agency and responsibility.

For this reason, REA studios, called ateliers, are often saturated with art supplies and natural materials readily displayed and available on carts or shelves. The classroom is transformed into an art studio where all materials exist to support a child’s creative expression and learning. Called “the third teacher,” it is inviting and celebrates children’s contributions and voices.<sup>13</sup>

## Group Work

The atelier is set up to inspire collaboration and group work. Children work in groups on large projects to be displayed. The artwork then takes on a metaphorical meaning—just as each child contributed to the project to make it interesting and beautiful, then too does each child contribute to society and give it meaning and value. Teachers and parents are “co-constructors” who do not passively relay information. Instead, they rely on the questions and interests of the group to guide curriculum.<sup>14</sup> This aspect of the REA, called *progettazione*, is particularly reminiscent of current group work models like inquiry-based research and emergent curriculum.

## Social Learning

The REA emerged from a very specific time and culture. After the fall of fascism in Italy, the parents of Reggio Emilia wanted their children to learn how to be citizens of a global world. Specifically, they wanted their children to be able to identify societal ills and think critically about solutions. To this end, children in RE settings are encouraged to actively think of their role in various social spaces: family, school, and community. They aren't only participants or spectators; children are actors with the innate right to construct their world. They come to view themselves as participants informed by values with the capacity to make choices that contribute to the common good.<sup>15</sup>

## Documentation

Learning culminates in a publicly displayed record, which might include a final collaborative art piece, as well as any record of the process of learning, such as a photograph or film.<sup>16</sup> Publicly displaying (or documenting) learning elevates the voice of the child and makes visible their dignity. Additionally, it provides conversation fodder between parents, teachers, and children who can collectively discuss learning, process, and trial and error. It acts as a witness to the larger community about children's thoughts and ideas and invites community members into the mind of children.

## Limitations

The REA has been scrutinized by academics and educational philosophers for its idealized approach to Early Childhood education. Indeed, many of the principles informing the REA are extremely difficult to implement and replicate. The REA assumes a certain access to financial resources, administrative support, low teacher-child ratios, and adaptable classrooms. Johnson argues that by attempting to implement the REA in North America, educators water down the principles yet are celebrated for their effort due to the trendy and attractive rhetoric of the REA.<sup>17</sup> This results in a poor learning environment more concerned with using a popular label than



Displaying children's artwork is important to self-esteem.

quality education. Teachers are then complicit in perpetuating a colonialist mindset that steals foreign educational models never intended to function for their audience.

While the REA can theoretically be adapted and modified for any culture and environment, scholars have questioned its quick rise and relevance in North America. Specifically, learning the REA is expensive and time consuming, thereby turning it into a model only accessible to upper-class families. The REA comes to be associated with an elite class of educators that can afford to travel to Italy for the prestigious summer study program.<sup>18</sup> This further supports the rhetoric of educational colonialism motivated by capitalism and prestige.

It is worth questioning if the REA contains any theories or concepts that are inherently worth importing given that they are already widespread in most early childhood learning spaces. Does the REA truly present any new or valuable information? Or is its packaging simply more alluring than others? Indeed, the focus on natural materials, group work, and documentation evokes a sense of beauty and wonder. Yet being outside, doing group work, and displaying projects in the classroom aren't particularly novel.

These concerns haven't prevented the REA from continuing its monumental rise to educational stardom. However, they persist as valuable insight and keep educators grounded in an effort to curtail the REA from simply being a popular trend or hype.

## Research Question

As a librarian, I strive to offer the highest quality programs and learning experiences for patrons. The REA's focus on environment and culture made it appealing to me, as the library is a public asset that seeks to increase citizenship

and community engagement. In fall 2018, I set out to answer the following question: What is the REA's relevance to public libraries and how can it be modified for an early childhood library program?

## Method

I developed four monthly art programs for children ages four and five, called The Children's Art Studio. Each program centered on a theme unique to Oklahoma City (where my library is located) in an effort to bring in the element of environment and citizenship. The four themes were the Oklahoma City skyline, severe storms, wind, and the state bird (scissor-tailed flycatcher). These themes were chosen because all participants would have some baseline experience of them, and they would provide sufficient fodder for conversation and individualized experience. I spent six months reviewing the literature on the REA and immersing myself in online communities to ensure I had a solid grasp of the approach.

The program began with an introduction of the theme, the reading of a related picture book, and a conversation about each child's experience of the topic. For example, during the program about storms, children talked about their favorite kinds of storms, what they do when there are storm warnings, and ways to overcome feelings of fear during storms. These conversations were crucial to make the art relevant to their lives and to integrate the element of social learning.

Next, I explained that the group would be working together on an art project that would be displayed in the children's area of the library in a rotating exhibit. Each child would contribute to a larger work of art thereby participating in group work and documentation. The exact nature of their contribution varied each month and is described below. Caregivers were encouraged to support their child but not direct the project or choice of materials. Displaying the work of art would allow for other library customers to witness the kind of learning that occurs in libraries and for children to feel a sense of ownership over the space.

After the introduction, the children dispersed to four large tables. Against the back wall of the space, ten to fifteen different kinds of materials and supplies were available. The room was set up to be inviting and inspire creativity. The tables were covered with brown butcher paper to make it feel like a workspace, and the materials were arranged by coherent categories (glues, fabrics, paints, tools, etc.) for clarity. No example was provided in order to encourage creativity instead of replication. The children then worked thirty to forty-five minutes, at which time I collected their work and assembled it. Once assembled, it was taken to the children's area and displayed with a sign saying, "Exhibit created by the Children of the Belle Isle Library."

The core REA elements of art, documentation, group work, social learning, parents as collaborators, and material choices

were present. However, given that library programming rooms aren't fixed in their purpose or use, the concept of the atelier was adapted to the best of my ability but lacked the vibrancy and whimsical elements often found in REA learning spaces.

## Projects

*The Oklahoma City Skyline.* I identified fifteen well-known buildings in Oklahoma City, traced them on cardboard, and cut them out. Each child could choose which building to work on and were tasked with embellishing it with the available materials. They were provided with pictures of the actual buildings for inspiration. Once finished, the buildings were set next to each other on a shelf creating a skyline of the city. Children were then asked to write down on note cards what they like about living in Oklahoma City.

*Oklahoma Storms.* I cut out sixty cardboard raindrops of different sizes, and the children embellished them. The raindrops were strung together vertically and then hung from a wooden dowel creating a "wall of rain." Available materials were all in cold colors and generated a conversation about the differences between cold and warm colors.

*Oklahoma Winds.* Children created and decorated pinwheels that were planted in a Styrofoam block and displayed on a shelf. The pinwheels were used to represent the wind turbines in southern Oklahoma.

*Oklahoma Scissortail Bird.* Children embellished birds cut from paper plates and created their own version of a scissortail bird. They could also paint a small wooden birdhouse. The birds were hung together from a branch to create a mobile.

## Findings

Three elements of the REA significantly enhanced the quality of the program, compared to similar art programs I have offered in the past.

*Merit of Art Display.* The programs yielded beautiful, interesting, and unique works of art displayed in the library. Library customers regularly commented on them and they added visual interest to an otherwise plain wall. Several children returned to the library specifically to see the projects hung and expressed pride at their work being in the building. Documentation reinforced the reality that the library belongs not to librarians, but to members of the community.

*Creativity.* Providing a wide array of open-ended materials saved money and amplified creativity. Because there was no example of a finished product, the children were forced to use their creativity and imagination with the materials. This clearly challenged them, and I was asked multiple times, "How are we supposed to do this?" I responded, "However you choose to!"

Having a wide assortment of materials allowed for choices, which produced surprisingly diverse works. This was most clearly seen in the Oklahoma Storms projects. Each raindrop is different and reflective of the preferences and artistic inclinations of the children. The open-ended nature of the projects lent itself well to a low-cost program. Because the materials were not being used to fulfill a specific purpose or outcome, they could be recycled over and over again. Paint, fabric, paint sticks, pom poms, markers, cardboard: these are supplies that many libraries already have on hand.

*Connection to Place.* The REA's focus on environment encouraged me to think about unifying themes in the lives of the children who attended the program and to integrate them into their work. The ten-to-fifteen-minute introduction of and conversation about the theme produced thoughtful and meaningful interactions. The children talked about personal experiences, their feelings, and their attachment to place. During the first program about the Oklahoma City Skyline, one child said, "I love where I live because my family is here." While discussion is encouraged in dialogic reading techniques used in storytimes, the quality of the discussion was significantly higher in the Children's Art Studio compared to what is usually achieved in storytime. I credit this to the fact that the program themes were rooted in daily life and provided an opportunity to express opinion and preference.

In addition to these positive results, there were drawbacks that made me question the transferability of the REA to libraries.

*Leaving Artwork.* While the final displays delighted library customers, they created some unexpected tension for some of the participants. Participants were confused about why they couldn't take their creations home at the end of the program. To address this issue, I explained the display during the introduction of the program, and that their artwork was so valuable everyone in the library wanted to see it.

This did not appease their frustration, and so if a child wanted to take their project home, they were permitted to do so. By the third project, I doubled the materials and encouraged children to make one to take home and one to display. This reveals the inherent tension in the concept of documentation—what is more important, that children get to have ownership over their work and decide what comes of it, or that library customers get to benefit from it? In light of libraries' commitment to freedom, asking children to leave their creations at the library against their will is an inherent conflict and violation of their agency.

*Child-Led.* In a typical REA setting, teachers listen to students' interests and design projects around them. This is an obvious limitation in a library setting where attendance fluctuates, and programs need to be planned in advance. While the child's voice and agency were reflected in the choice of materials, it was not reflected in the actual content of the program. I tried to compensate for this by making available materials



Pretty painted pinwheels.

the children expressed interest in. For example, paint sticks were popular in the first program so I made sure they were included in future programs. In this way, their interests were acknowledged and accommodated. However, this falls short of REA practice as the Children's Art Studio was still programmer-led.

*Local Content.* The Oklahoma-themed content proved to be an asset, but also quickly exhaustible material. Finding four unique, locally based themes relevant to all children who would attend was challenging. This coupled with the lack of child input in program content made for a particularly difficult and research-intensive planning period.

Attempting to adapt the REA to a public library setting was challenging, surprising, and rewarding. Specifically, it forced me to think about the environment children are immersed in and use it as program inspiration. The participating children had much to share about this topic and seemed genuinely excited to talk about their neighborhood, city, and state. REA concepts elevated and amplified an otherwise standard early childhood art program through materials exploration, documentation, and social learning. I regard these three elements as the most valuable contributions of the REA to public library programming.

Other environment-focused theories, such as Connected Learning and Environment-Based Learning, are inquiry-driven, meaning the students seek to solve a problem, often scientific in nature, in their environment.<sup>19</sup> The environment is a source of problems and solutions, rendering the relationship between student and environment largely transactional. The REA, on the other hand, uses the environment as a worthy subject of analysis and curiosity. Problem-solving isn't exempt from the approach, but it isn't its focus. The environment inspires a sense of ownership, responsibility, and wonder and is valued for its own sake.

This sense of appreciation for the environment is then transferred to the child's work through documentation. Just as the environment is to be examined and appreciated, so is the child's art. Publicly displaying a child's work certainly enhanced the aesthetic of the children's area, but it also instilled a clear and unique sense of pride and joy. As mentioned in the findings, documentation should not stand in opposition to a child's agency and ownership over their work. I circumvented this by having children make duplicates, but there may be other alternatives to explore.

By having few special materials out for each project (birdhouses and Styrofoam blocks were the only special supplies purchased), the program was surprisingly affordable. The layout (having many materials available to choose from) reinforced the concept of the atelier. The room became a workspace with tools and inspired a sense of possibility. It was not unusual for a child or caregiver to comment on the amount of materials available while walking into the room.

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This generated a feeling of pride toward their work as well as pride towards their decisions. Librarians may not be able to replicate a true atelier, but they can create a "possibility-rich environment" encouraging materials exploration and choices by diversifying materials available and not encouraging the use of any one tool.<sup>20</sup>

I intentionally did not advertise the Children's Art Studio as an REA program. For one, it is not necessary for caregivers and children to know the theoretical underpinnings of a program to enjoy it. But more importantly, using the term may have conjured up a set of expectations among caregivers who were familiar with the REA. Even though the REA is free to be adapted and scholars claim there is no one true way to implement it, there are still assumptions about what such a program might look like. For this reason, I intentionally used the verb "adapt" to signal borrowing and learning from as opposed to appropriating. Adapting the REA is not intended to reflect the use or mastery of a certain trend. Ultimately, it matters little which approach is used in programs as long as it supports early literacy and learning.

I encourage children's librarians to consider the value of social learning and documentation in their programs. While my experimentation did not (and could not) lead to a definitive and absolute embrace of the REA, it is a rich and thoughtful intellectual tradition that values the contributions of children and seeks to form them into good citizens. This is a goal public libraries can get behind. &

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