

DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN FOLLOWING THE REGGIO EMILIA EDUCATIONAL METHOD

*Tran Thi Quyet**

Email: tranquyetmn86@gmail.com

Received: 09/03/2023

Revised: 25/08/2023

Accepted: 30/08/2023

DOI: 10.59266/houjs.2023.312

Abstract: *The educational environment always emphasizes its crucial role in the early childhood education process. Paying attention to and selecting ways to construct an educational environment for young children is essential for managers and teachers at early childhood education institutions. The Reggio Emilia approach is one of the educational methods that excel in creating an educational environment for preschool children. The following article shares core content on building an educational environment for young children following the Reggio Emilia approach, including: principles; characteristics; methods of constructing both indoor and outdoor classroom environments for preschoolers. It ensures comprehensive development based on individual capabilities in interactions with the environment and those around the child. This article employs theoretical research methods, verified through observation and the application of the Reggio Emilia approach in the research area, with the hope of spreading the advantages of this educational method in the current early childhood education system in Vietnam.*

Keywords: *Reggio Emilia, Constructing an educational environment, early childhood education.*

I. Introduction

The educational environment consistently plays an essential role in shaping and developing the personalities of students in general and preschoolers in particular. Especially for preschoolers, who mainly learn through play and predominately think

in visual terms, the educational setting becomes even more vital.

Among various early childhood education methods, the Reggio Emilia approach has been practically proven to be a strong method in establishing an educational environment that maximizes the potential of preschoolers. This

* Kim Lũ Kindergarten

progressive method emphasizes children's creativity and imagination, offering them experiential opportunities and the ability to respond to any situation, making them confident, joyful, and inventive. The Reggio Emilia approach stems from the belief that every child harbors immense potential, which can be unlocked by their innate curiosity. Children strive to understand the world around them and come up with their unique ways to interpret its workings.

The author's research aims to provide teachers with insights, leading to suggestions for building a more effective learning environment for children. Simultaneously, parents can also refer to this research to support and collaborate with teachers in the education process and engage with their children at home.

II. Theoretical Basis

2.1. The role of the educational environment and the construction of the educational environment for children following the Reggio Emilia approach

The educational environment in preschool plays a paramount role. It consists of the essential natural and social conditions that directly influence all activities related to child care and education. It significantly contributes to achieving the objectives of early childhood care and education.

The physical environment in preschool includes equipment, toys, and spaces that facilitate the organization of children's daily activities. This environment provides ample opportunities for children to satisfy their activity needs and develop holistically in terms of physical, linguistic, cognitive, aesthetic,

emotional, and social skills.

An effective preschool educational environment ensures comprehensive development in various areas: Physical growth, cognitive needs fulfillment, broadening children's understanding, stimulating proactive and creative activities, forming essential life skills, and allowing children to participate actively, independently, and more autonomously in exploring the world around them. This ensures children's needs for play and activities are met, creating conditions for them to actively and autonomously explore, experience, and maximize their inherent potential. It also enables children to share their needs and wishes with teachers and peers, leading to a better mutual understanding.

Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, believed that the "educational environment is the third teacher for the child", following teachers and parents, opening opportunities for experiential learning and creativity enhancement. Each child possesses varied latent capabilities, and the task of schools and parents is to collaboratively create the best developmental environment for them. "What children learn isn't an automatic outcome of what they are taught. Instead, a significant portion of what they learn results from their activities and our resources," he said.

The environment, as the third teacher, is also where children's learning outcomes manifest. It provides tools for children to materialize their ideas. In the Reggio Emilia method, collaboration among children is highly valued. Ideal Reggio Emilia schools typically feature an "art workshop" filled with materials like clay, paints, and other natural

resources. Children utilize these materials in the workshop to creatively express their thoughts and understandings, personalizing their discoveries or lessons through individual or group interactions.

Children are encouraged and facilitated to solve problems and articulate their ideas and emotions autonomously. The learning environment is designed to be flexible and aesthetically pleasing. Loris Malaguzzi shared, “Our task is to stimulate creativity in young children so that they conquer the highest possible mountains with their own feet. Nobody can do more than that.”

2.2. Principles for constructing an educational environment for children according to the Reggio Emilia approach

2.2.1. For the best interest of the child: The design of the educational environment must prioritize the child’s holistic development to achieve early childhood education objectives and end-of-age goals. It also needs to ensure appropriateness for organizing various childcare and education activities, guaranteeing aesthetics and safety. This environment should make children feel loved, respected, and cater to their legitimate needs.

2.2.2. Ensure the development of the child’s individual potential: There should be a logical arrangement of different zones based on specific themes to ignite the child’s interest in learning and curiosity. The existing space in the school should be planned to distribute areas suitable for activities corresponding to the age, interests, capabilities, etc., of the children. This arrangement should also be fitting for collective classroom activities, group or individual tasks.

2.2.3. Ensure alignment with reality: Necessary equipment should be adequately available, from apparatus, learning materials, to toys that fit the content of each theme. Integrate the child’s acquired knowledge and skills into the construction of the environment, stimulating their comprehensive development.

2.2.4. Emphasize children’s interactions: Always create opportunities to help children expand their relationships, making them more confident and enthusiastic about holistic development activities. Encourage children to invent toys and games based on their ideas in an interactive setting; organize opportunities for them to participate in free-play activities, competitions, festivals, etc., allowing them to experience and “practice”.

2.3. Characteristics of Constructing an Educational Environment for Preschoolers According to the Reggio Emilia Approach

2.3.1. The environment as the third teacher.

In Reggio, the environment is seen as the third educator, following teachers and the child’s parents. Children come to understand the world around them through their own experiments and experiences. Most classrooms have a studio, colloquially known as a “workshop”, filled with materials such as clay, paint, writing tools, and design equipment. Children use these tools to express their ideas in practical learning. Exploring the world around them boosts children’s confidence in their learning journey, enhancing their imagination and creativity. While traditional education offers orderly classrooms with books, pens, and tests, the Reggio Emilia approach creates an

environment where children “live” and grow through projects, experiments, field trips, and especially, a thirst for knowledge and a lifelong passion for learning.

Rather than “confining” children within four walls, constantly feeding them knowledge as if a factory producing robots, an ideal educational environment is where children can learn counting through cooking, delve into history while dancing, or imbibe the cultural values of their heritage through activities like planting trees. Every child has myriad unique ways of expressing creativity; therefore, a classroom should resemble a laboratory or studio, stocked with diverse materials like clay, colors, pencils, watercolors, drawing boards, and craft paper, catering to their spontaneous ideas. By observing how children interact with learning materials, we can understand their personalities and help shape their characters. Louise Boyd Cadwell, in her work on the “Reggio Emilia Approach”, recounts that when she gave clay to students to freely construct their preferred house models and observed the process, she saw them creating unique structures, even crafting intriguing stories with diverse characters revolving around these structures. Beyond just tangible knowledge, abstract and intangible themes such as traditional culture, national identity, and moral values are more easily assimilated by children through experiential activities.

For example, children might explore the variations in human attire throughout history by participating in clothes decoration activities or fashion shows. They might imprint the beauty of their homeland when seeing lush bamboo groves every day in their school. Or simply, they might grasp the power of teamwork

after a disagreement with a group mate. With the classroom as a “laboratory”, teachers and parents don’t need to exert every effort to explain concepts; instead, children will naturally learn and remember through their own experiences. This doesn’t mean letting children roam freely, but rather closely observing them to understand the significance of each of their actions. The adults’ role then becomes one of guidance, inspiration, and encouragement, ensuring children persist in their journey of exploring the world. Currently, the arrangement and decoration of the classroom environment seem rigid and lacking creativity.

2.3.2. Open Learning Environment

A hallmark of the Reggio Emilia approach is that children must learn in an open environment. Firstly, the classroom should incorporate natural elements like plants and benefit from natural light, maximizing space to stimulate the child’s creativity. In addition, tools and learning equipment in the class should be scientifically arranged and clearly organized. The classroom environment should undergo changes every academic year to provide a fresh atmosphere that ensures children’s imaginations don’t stagnate.

2.3.3. Nature as a Teaching Tool, Saying “No” to Plastics

The Reggio Emilia educational method is a pioneering approach that intertwines a child’s development with nature, flora, and fauna. Consequently, materials used in classroom decoration projects are all made from natural ingredients. Specifically, plastic items are completely eliminated, and children are introduced to recycled, environmentally-friendly materials that ensure their health. Reggio Emilia classrooms often feature

learning tools like leaves, flowers, rice, pebbles, and stones. These materials can be innovatively used in their Reggio Emilia projects. This method bolsters children's creativity, fosters logical thinking, and enhances their understanding of math through shapes, colors, and the textures of these learning materials.

2.3.4. Choosing Soft, Neutral Colors

According to scientific research and the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, vibrant colors can potentially agitate children, making them prone to anger, frustration, and increasing the risk of hyperactivity. Therefore, the Reggio Emilia educational method encourages parents and teachers to choose soft, neutral colors for educational tools, materials, and classroom decorations. Especially, when coloring tools or materials for projects, organic and child-safe colors should be used.

2.3.5. Decorating the Space with Creative Products from Teachers and Children

Numerous unique projects are found in Reggio Emilia classrooms. The creative products and quirky designs born from these projects are perfect for classroom displays and decorations. When children see their work showcased, they feel valued, which further motivates them to continue learning, exploring, and embarking on new projects. A space adorned with their own creations enhances their imagination, offering a fresh experience that prevents the school or learning from becoming monotonous.

2.3.6. An Educational Environment That Facilitates Multilingual Communication

In a Reggio Emilia classroom, children are not limited to just one or two

languages; they are supported to learn and engage with multiple languages. They are exposed to different modes of expression through activities like dance, music, and art. Following these activities, children have the freedom to express themselves in their unique linguistic style. This encourages children to articulate their thoughts in a myriad of ways. Such an emphasis on diverse modes of communication is a fundamental aspect of the Reggio Emilia learning approach. It ensures that children have the opportunity to fully utilize all the languages and senses they possess.

2.4. Constructing an Early Childhood Education Environment Following the Reggio Emilia Approach

The arrangement of space within classrooms and schools plays a crucial role in promoting children's creativity. Traditional classrooms in Reggio always incorporate plants, natural materials, and natural light. Space is maximized with large windows and small open areas. Additionally, essential tools and materials for children's projects are systematically arranged. Spatial elements are a top priority in preschool settings. The environment of classrooms and schools following the Reggio approach is encouraged to undergo changes annually to maintain an open and refreshing ambiance. Loris Malaguzzi believed: "When children are recognized as constructors or creators and are assisted in discovering the joys of exploration, they become vibrant and enthusiastic."

Only use self-made toys and say no to plastics. The Reggio Emilia approach prioritizes using items made from natural resources. When children interact with these objects, it not only ensures their exploration and discovery but also guarantees safety during use. Typically,

classrooms feature learning materials like plant leaves, flowers, pebbles, and stones. These materials, prepared by the teacher for the children, are ensured to be creative and safe. Such materials also aid in children's intellectual and creative development, ensuring their well-being.

In the "laboratory" of Reggio Emilia, teachers and parents won't need to go out of their way to impart dry, factual knowledge. Instead, children will autonomously learn and retain knowledge through their experiential activities. This doesn't mean children are left entirely to their own devices. Teachers need to provide guidance and closely monitor their activities during the learning process. In this context, the role of adults is primarily to inspire and encourage children in their knowledge exploration journey [3].

2.4.1. Regarding the Educational Environment Inside the Classroom

When designing the educational environment in the classroom, educators need to consider how to stimulate the development of children's five senses as follows [5][6]:

Olfactory (smell): Use essential oils to create a gentle aroma that makes children feel comfortable during their learning and creative processes.

Auditory (hear): Incorporate music into all children's daily activities and learning processes. This helps instill a habit in children to anticipate subsequent activities. Especially, combining pleasant scents with music can aid in deeper and more restful sleep for children.

Tactile (touch): Engage children in activities where they can feel different textures and materials like sand, rocks, and pebbles.

Gustatory (taste): Organize activities where children taste various foods and identify their flavors – whether sour, spicy, salty, or sweet.

Visual (see): Support children in exploring colors, shapes, and the surrounding lights.

The color palette for classroom walls should be soft. Scientific research indicates that the Reggio Emilia approach fosters early childhood development. When decorating a classroom following this method, it is advisable to opt for soft and neutral wall colors. This is because vibrant, intense colors can inadvertently make children feel irritable, leading to frustration. This, in turn, might increase the risk of hyperactivity in children.

Depending on the class, these areas will be arranged differently. Classroom arrangements are constantly changed according to the needs and ideas of the teacher in charge. In a classroom that isn't cluttered with excessive items and tools, there seems to be an endless space for children's activities. Kids can run, jump, and gaze at life outside through the windows rather than being confined to cramped rooms. They are always free to carry out "projects" with basic equipment provided such as clay, paints, and writing tools. They remain busy with continuously emerging ideas, which almost instantly materialize in such a comprehensive learning environment. Children's creative works are displayed on classroom walls. They convey their ideas primarily through their drawings; most of them choose drawing as a medium to share with others what they are thinking, doing, feeling, learning, and experiencing. The teacher's role is to guide the children in drawing techniques and provide them with the tools to express their ideas.

2.4.2. Regarding the Educational Environment Outside the Classroom

Teachers need to construct an external classroom environment close to nature. Children will engage in activities such as planting and caring for various vegetables, playing with sand, water, and clay, and practicing both fine and gross motor skills in the playground. Teachers must also provide children with open-ended materials for them to freely explore and utilize during their learning processes, such as wood, stones, seashells, seeds, leaves, paper, strings, magnifying glasses, plastic cards, plastic tubes, fabric, or metal. Accompanying these are many smart tools and devices such as mirror tables, overhead projectors, light tables, and other projection devices,...

Most of the space is open, friendly, and flexible for children's activities. They must ensure ventilation and a connection with the natural environment surrounding the classroom. A standard Reggio school will have areas like: Construction and assembly zone; Drawing and painting area; Reading area; Toy storage zone; Game table area; and Information board.

The Reggio Emilia educational approach is diverse and distinctive, so the learning environment is intelligently designed to meet these requirements. A suggestion for building a smart classroom in line with the Reggio Emilia educational approach is to integrate an open space in the preschool with functional zones, serving the diverse learning and creative needs of the children. With such a smart learning environment, children will have ample opportunities for education and experience.

For instance, children can read in a serene space, learn music professionally,

or undergo physical training suited to their health. They might also get to unleash their artistic creativity through painting, sculpting in an artistically vibrant space, etc. Outside the school, at places that collaborate with the school in creating an educational environment, there's an extension to this immersive learning atmosphere for preschool children. These collaborations foster a sense of community and provide richer experiences for the children, allowing them to grasp concepts holistically and from multiple perspectives.

2.4.3. Teachers and parents are close collaborators.

In the Reggio Emilia approach classroom, teachers always encourage parents to participate. Through various exploration, discovery, and creative activities, parents will also gain a deeper understanding of their children, helping them to better care for them at home. Teachers and parents play the role of close allies, or partners, in nurturing the child's holistic development.

Together, teachers and parents gather, search for, and select materials to introduce into the classroom environment, supporting the child in their creative endeavors with these materials.

III. Research Methodology

3.1. Document Research Method

Through reading, studying, and researching documents, books, and articles published both domestically and internationally on early childhood education and the Reggio Emilia approach to preschool education, information and data are collected to form the theoretical foundation of the article.

3.2. Analytical, Synthetic, Comparative, and Generalization Methods

These thinking methods are employed by the author to consolidate, generalize, and establish a theoretical framework for the article based on analytical, comparative, and evaluative reasoning, ensuring logical coherence and alignment with the current practice of early childhood education in Vietnam.

3.3. Observation Method

This method is used with the purpose of empirically testing the constructed theoretical framework in the context of early childhood education, ensuring reliability based on verified evidence when observing the construction of an educational environment for young children following the Reggio Emilia educational approach.

V. Conclusions

This article initially shares the author's conclusions from research on constructing an early childhood education environment following the Reggio Emilia approach. The intent is to spread the significance and usefulness of this educational method within the context of early childhood education in contemporary Vietnam. There's hope for its practical application and to affirm the excellence of the Reggio Emilia approach in further research in the domain of building educational environments for preschool children.

Based on this, the author recommends the following to teachers, administrators, and parents of students in early childhood

education institutions: No teaching method is universally applicable to every situation, especially for early childhood education - the starting phase of a long journey in forming and developing human character for the future. Applying educational methods in general, and the Reggio Emilia approach in particular, needs to ensure the principles mentioned in the article. Most importantly, the passion for the profession and love for children from all educational stakeholders is paramount, based on the foremost principle of "for the best interests of the child".

Reference:

- [1]. Bộ GD-ĐT (2021). Thông tư số 01/VBHN-BGDĐT ngày 13/4/2021 ban hành Chương trình giáo dục mầm non.
- [2]. Trịnh Thị Xim (2021). Một số vấn đề liên quan đến quan điểm xây dựng chương trình giáo dục mầm non Ý (Italia) và đề xuất quan điểm xây dựng chương trình giáo dục mầm non Việt Nam sau 2020. Hội thảo "Đề xuất quan điểm xây dựng chương trình giáo dục mầm non sau 2020". Bộ GD-ĐT, tr 75-87.
- [3]. Nguyễn Thị Thành (2022), "Giới thiệu hướng dẫn tiếp cận Reggio Emilia và ứng dụng trong bối cảnh đổi mới giáo dục mầm non tại Việt Nam", tạp chí giáo dục, 22(6), 20-25.
- [4]. Women played a fundamental role in this history. <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/timeline-en/>
- [5]. Louise Boyd Cadwell, Phương pháp giáo dục Reggio Emilia, Nxb Lao động
- [6]. TS. Nguyễn Thị Bích Thủy, Trao đổi một vài thông tin về phương pháp giáo dục Reggio Emilia. Tạp chí giáo dục số 233 (kì 1- 3/2010).