A Project-Based Approach in Child Education: Reggio Emilia

Hamit Coşkun[1] and Abdullah Durakoğlu[2]

Abstract

In this study, the Reggio Emilia Approach, which emerged in Italy and brought a new perspective on education, was examined in many aspects. The first part of the study included information on the creation process of this approach. The second part gave information on the conception that led to the creation of the Reggio Emilia Approach. The other parts of the study included information about the application of this approach. Those parts of the study also presented the differences of the Reggio Emilia Approach from other educational approaches.

In this study it was concluded that the Reggio Emilia Approach had clear differences from other educational approaches because it was project-based. Unlike the traditional educational systems, the Reggio Emilia Approach does not use any predetermined curriculums. The main element that shapes this approach is the project technique. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, the children develop projects according to their own areas of interest; therefore, this approach uses a "curriculum developed by children" instead of a "curriculum prepared for children". Considering this aspect, it was concluded that the Reggio Emilia Approach could be qualified as a project-based educational approach.

 Keywords: Reggio Emilia Approach, Loris Malaguzzi, child, preschool education, project technique

Introduction

Reggio Emilia Approach, named after the province located on the northern part of Italy, started to be designed immediately after the World War II in Cella Village in this province. Initiated by the women of this village under the leadership of a teacher, Loris Malaguzzi (1920 – 1994), this movement soon spread throughout the world. Reggio Emilia Approach continues to be practiced as one of the most widespread educational approaches in preschool education today.

[1] Abant Izzet Baysal University Faculty of Arts and Science, Department of Psychology, Bolu, 14280, E-mail: hamitcoskun2000@gmail.com

[2] Abant Izzet Baysal University Faculty of Arts and Science, Department of Sociology, Bolu, 14280, E-mail: adurakoglu06@gmail.com

The Reggio Emilia Approach, a source of inspiration for many preschool educators in the world, provides the necessary learning environment in social and emotional terms and aims to create ideal educational environments by acting with a principle of freedom and emphasizing that every culture should have its own specific educational environment. Therefore, educators willing to practice the Reggio Emilia Approach can prepare educational environments compliant with their own culture after perceiving the logic of this approach. In this respect, the Reggio Emilia Approach provides freedom for teachers and students; in other words, it prevents any problems to arise from cultural differences (İnan, 2012: 4). The freedom provided by this approach is not restricted with this. The Reggio Emilia Approach provides freedom for teachers and students thanks to its project technique, too. In this way, the Reggio Emilia curriculum emerges by itself in the process of education.

As the curiosity and interest of children are considered important in the Reggio Emilia Approach, the program is created by the children themselves. On the other side, teachers make general plans by determining targets for each age group in accordance with the physical, sentimental and cognitive development of children. Within the framework of such targets, the projects in which children show interest are put into practice in the Reggio Emilia schools. So, the curriculum is not structured in advance in Reggio Emilia Approach (İnan, 2012: 46). Therefore, the element that shapes the Reggio Emilia Approach is not the curriculum, but the conception underlying the projects developed by children. As the curriculum is prepared by the children themselves, we cannot mention a predetermined curriculum in this approach. The studies carried out in relation to this approach attempt to reveal the conception lying behind the projects developed by children. However, in order to understand the Reggio Emilia Approach, it is also necessary to know where, under which conditions and by whom this approach was designed (İnan, 2012: 4).

1. Process of Creation of the Reggio Emilia Approach

In 1945, the people in a village several kilometers away from the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy decided to build a school for children. However, few people believed in this idea. As the World War II had finished only six days ago, there was no institution or person that would be able to support the realization of this idea. Then, an educator named Loris Malaguzzi cycled to this village. There he saw women cleaning the bricks that would be used for the

construction of the school. Malaguzzi noticed that the people were quite decided (Malaguzzi, 2010: 43). Referring to this experience, Malaguzzi said:

> The community had made their decision. They would use the money gained through the sale of several horses, trucks and weapon carriers which were left by the Germans while they were escaping. They told me: 'The rest will come'. I said: 'I am a teacher'. They told me 'good'. And they asked 'So, are you going to come here for teaching?' (Malaguzzi, 2010: 43).

Malaguzzi stated that the school was constructed within eight months thanks to the self-sacrifice of the workers and villagers that survived the war. This school, named "Villa Cella", became the starting point. Afterwards, schools would continue to be built in the poorest areas of the village. Then, Malaguzzi decided to leave the public school where he had worked for seven years and attend a psychology course near Rome. After coming back from Rome, he started to work in the Psycho-pedagogical Health Center of the municipality, which had been established for children with problems. While he was continuing his work there in the mornings, he was managing the Reggio Emilia schools in the afternoons and evenings. With Malaguzzi's initiative in 1963, the first children's school under the Reggio Emilia Municipality was established (Edwards et al., 2010: 43).

This initiative taken by the Municipality continued in the following years. In the end of 1960s, a stable increase had been achieved in the number of children's schools of the Municipality. In 1971, nursery schools for children aged between 0 and 3 were also established by the Municipality. In the end of 1970s, the number of children's schools increased to 20 and the number of nursery schools increased to 13. This development was a wonderful fruit of the pedagogical conception of Malaguzzi, the initiatives of the municipality to fulfill the increasing demands of the families and the mobilization of the women (Lotti e Bendotti, 2009: 18).

In the mid-1980s, the number of the families that wanted to send their children to nursery schools increased so much that many parents could not succeed to enroll their children in these educational institutions. Towards the end of 1980s, the subsidies provided by the state for local institutions were decreased due to economic crisis; so, this caused many problems even in the educational institutions of the Reggio Emilia Municipality. In addition, as there was not a significant increase in the number of the Reggio Emilia Educational institutions in this period, various solutions started to be produced in order to respond to the demands (Lotti e Bendotti, 2009: 18- 19).

The Reggio Emilia Municipality developed a very original solution to get rid of this crisis. After a large-scale negotiation was held in the municipality, a decision was made in favor of the children. According to this decision, a diversified educational system was adopted. So, educational institutions, which had been previously allowed to be opened and operated only by the municipalities, could now be opened as private schools, cooperative schools or schools directly managed by the central authority. A considerable increase was achieved in the number of children's schools after this decision. The increase continued after the 1990s, too (Lotti e Bendotti, 2009: 18- 19).

As of 2008, there were 55 children's schools, 23 nursery schools and 5 multiservice (both children's and nursery) schools provide education through Malaguzzi approach in the Province of Reggio Emilia. Totally 540 people worked in all of these educational institutions. This number included especially teachers and pedagogue managers, as well as people from various occupations ranging from technician to cook (Lotti e Bendotti, 2009: 48).

2. Bases of the Reggio Emilia Approach

2.1. The Hundred Is There!

Loris Malaguzzi's poem titled "The Hundred Is There", which is at the heart of his approach, gives information about the basic philosophy of this approach. The poem mentions the talents of children and criticizes the traditional educational and social system. In this respect, the idea of "the need for an educational system compliant with the nature of the child" constitutes the main theme of this poem.

Malaguzzi suggests in his poem that there are at least a hundred ways for the child to express himself/herself, and he does not restrict the child with the language tool. In his poem, he emphasizes that different ways other than verbal expressions can be used by children to express themselves, and he puts forward an educational system in which children can benefit from these ways. As the Reggio Emilia Approach is targeted for children between 0 and 6, it also covers children that have not completed their language development (İnan, 2012: 17).

2.2. Every Child Has the Right to Education

One of the bases of the Reggio Emilia Approach is the recognition of education as a right of every child. It is clear that this approach does not consider the education as a privilege granted to some children. According to the Reggio Emilia Approach, education is a right for all male

and female children. Education, which also allows for personal and collective liberation and development, is an opportunity to know and to live together. In the case of multiple cultural, political and religious views, education means dialog, participation and listening. Education contributes to the achievement of peace and it is a meeting point for freedom, democracy, and solidarity. Nursery and children's schools serving this purpose are educational centers building the child's culture and leading to interaction. Such centers consider the rights of the children and support their education, learning and care (Istituzioni del Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2009: 7).

2.3. Metaphor of the Wall

Malaguzzi expresses another basis of the Reggio Emilia Approach through the metaphor of the wall. He uses wall as a metaphor for the barrier to the development of the child. According to the Reggio Emilia Approach, all of the rules and habits fixed by the traditional models of education are considered to be a wall. The purpose of this approach is to go beyond the wall. Malaguzzi expresses this through the saying "if the eye jumps over the wall" (L'occhio se salta il muro) (Dal Catalogo della Mostra, 1996: 24).

The Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870- 1952) plays a significant role in Malaguzzi's pedagogical conception, which criticizes the traditional education systems and brings the child to the forefront. Montessori (1975: 107- 108), the founder of the most common educational method of the world, believes that children have a personality structure that is disturbed by adults. According to this idea, adults are a combination of barriers for children. As is known, every unusual reaction of the child is considered to be bad temper. According to Montessori, what lies behind such behavior is their attempt to show themselves to the world. Therefore, she asserts that education is for the discovery and liberation of the child.

According to Montessori, who believes that the inner structure of children is different from that of adults, the biggest problem is the oppressive attitude of adults towards children. Montessori advocates that children cannot enjoy a development that is appropriate for their nature due to the oppressive behavior of adults (Durakoğlu, 2011: 100,111). While children's talents weaken due to oppressive education, they also develop some abnormal behaviors. Within this framework, Montessori (1953: 90) develops an educational method that is appropriate for the natural development of the child. According to him, the child naturally bears all the potentials that can be active. So, it is necessary to help the child to unearth all

such potentials, so that the child can develop appropriately. Consequently, the Method of Montessori is built upon a pedagogical conception in which the child is active.

The Reggio Emilia Approach is also based on the argument that the children must not be deprived of the pleasure to research and ask. Carla Rinaldi (1998: 198), who served for the development of this approach and worked with Malaguzzi for years, asserts that adults should be aware of the energy, strength and creativity of the children. Otherwise, the talents of children become blunt. Similarly, one of the most important foundations of the Malaguzzi pedagogy is the problem of 'how to communicate with the child'. The Reggio Emilia Approach appeared as a formula to be used for the elimination of this problem.

3. Reggio Emilia School Environment

Instead of applying an existing program, some assistance is provided for the children in the works to be done in Reggio Emilia schools. In other words, programs are not structured at a high level in these schools. Therefore, the schools out of the Province of Reggio Emilia are not called as Reggio Emilia schools, but as schools inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach (İnan, 2012: 4). In this respect, the Reggio Emilia schools that researchers and educators can take as a model are only those schools located in the Province of Reggio Emilia. The Reggio Emilia schools located in this province have such areas as entrances, shared areas, gardens, workshops, mini workshops, music rooms, theatres, dining halls and archive rooms. The areas 'shared area' and 'workshop' have particular importance as they are specific to the Reggio Emilia Approach.

3.1. Shared Area (Piazza)

Children from different age groups can come together at 'piazza', which is a common area at Reggio Emilia schools. Malaguzzi thinks of 'piazza' as a city from the Renaissance period, because 'piazza' at Reggio Emilia schools is an area to talk, to debate, to make shows. Malaguzzi calls 'piazza' as a place to which different ideas are carried (Gandini, 2010: 226).

According to Malaguzzi, 'piazza' is also a place for tours. In this area, adults can be also here with children during school hours. In this sense, 'piazza' is a place of intersection. So, adults and children can exchange their ideas. In addition, this area enables children to walk and run freely and to have a break (Gandini, 2010: 226).

3.2. Workshop (Atelier)

A Reggio Emilia school has mini workshops, in addition to a big one, for the students to do research. The small workshops are named as 'mini atelier'. In the workshops, the children are engaged in various activities such as painting a wall through different techniques, cooking ceramic, shaping clay, building statuettes or small structures, designing micro environments in boxes, moving lights, etc. In this respect, workshops are centers of design and aesthetics (Tonucci, 1998: 32- 33).

Workshops, which look like art rooms at the first sight, are places that provide opportunity for the children to express their thoughts and emotions through various ways. The importance of workshops can be better understood when Malaguzzi's poem 'Hundred Languages of Children' is analyzed. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, workshops were put into practice for the children to express themselves in non-verbal ways, too (İnan, 2012: 28).

4. The Main Keys of the Reggio Emilia Education System

According to Rinaldi, children, teachers and families constitute the main keys of the Reggio education system. What is important in this education system is the relationship among children, educators and families. In this respect, the Reggio Emilia schools are some kind of relationships system. Therefore, the relationship of children with the others is considered important (New, 1998: 24).

4.1. Children

Rinaldi (1998: 198), who suggests that the child should not be deprived of the pleasure to research and ask, believes that the adult should be aware of this. According to him, the talents of the child will weaken if the adult is not aware of the energy, strength and creativity of the child. The child wants to be seen and observed.

Malaguzzi and Rinaldi, whose perception of the child is different from that of traditional educators, build the Reggio Emilia Approach upon the creativity of the child. The child is at the heart of this approach. Therefore, in the Reggio Emilia schools, the environment is designed so as to be suitable for the children to act freely.

The roots of the child-focused educational conception of Malaguzzi and Rinaldi are based on the ideas of Montessori. Montessori, who names the ages 3-6 as sensitive periods, believes that those children who discover themselves between 0 and 3 start to have interest in their

surroundings in this sensitive period. Therefore, such children frequently ask questions and have requests. This interest of the children should not be ignored (Schafer, 2006: 45). Influenced by the conception of Montessori, Rinaldi (1998: 198) states one of the most important questions of the Reggio Emilia Approach: How should the children be communicated? According to him, this is one of the basic questions of the Reggio Emilia Approach. The Reggio Emilia Approach is designed in such a way to answer this question.

4.2. Teachers

In the Reggio Emilia Approach, teachers are, above all, good listeners and observers. They endeavor to understand the words, behaviors, relationships with each other, questions and curiosity of children (İnan, 2012: 26).

On the other side, the role of the teacher may have different dimensions in the Reggio Emilia Approach. Teachers attempt to reveal the cases that will cause the children to make new discoveries by communicating with them. In this regard, teachers should carefully watch the activities of children and acquire information about their project topics. On one hand, teachers talk with the parents about the project topics and provide necessary materials for the children. On the other hand, they attempt to encourage them to be engaged in activities (Edwars, 2010: 236- 237).

In the Reggio Emilia Approach, the teacher is in the role of a supporter and guide. Even when the children are working on a project, the teacher does not provide them with formulas to solve a problem they may face. Instead, the teacher helps the children solve the problem. So, the role of the teacher is restricted with helping the children. In other words, in the Reggio Emilia Approach, the teacher is in the position of a guide that works with the children and provides strategies and resources for them to overcome the difficulties they face (Edwars, 2010: 237). It is clear that not only the students, but also the teacher learns a lot in this educational process. Therefore, the teacher in the Reggio Emilia Approach stops being an expert, and if necessary, assumes the role of a student that asks "Can we work together?" (İnan, 2012: 26).

4.3. Families

The parents of the children are also one of the components of the education in the Reggio Emilia Approach. In the traditional approach towards education, parents are considered only

as the people responsible for the children. In the Reggio Emilia Schools, parents cannot be just considered as people that discuss with the educators about the situation of their child. Parents can even directly take part in the educational activities of their children.

The parents of the children in the Reggio Emilia schools can visit these schools under the title of observers or volunteers. Parents can even participate in the conferences with the teachers. Besides, it is believed, according to the Reggio Emilia Approach, that parents can provide additional awareness. Since the parents also know their children outside of the school, they can cooperate with the teachers in order to have more comprehensive information about the children's tendencies, emotions, and thoughts (Forman e Fyfe, 1998: 164- 165).

5. Basic Techniques of the Reggio Emilia Education System

5.1. Documentation (Documentazione)

Documentation is one of the most important elements that constitute the basis of the Reggio Emilia Approach. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, documentation, or 'documentazione' in Italian, is different from the traditional conception of document collection. In this approach, documentation presents in detail the process of the performance of the activities by the students. Documentation, which is dealt with by teachers, includes learning processes. In other words, documentation is not about the result, but about the experiences. Therefore, a drawing made by children is not accepted as documentation. However, a video of the child creating a drawing can be considered as documentation. A series of drawing works can also be regarded as documentation since it would show the development of the child's drawing talent. The purpose of documentation is not to simply reveal the activities of the child, but to make an explanation about them. But the documentations can be hung on the boards on the classroom's walls. They can also be stored in paper cabinets for the purpose of archiving. However, documentations cannot be used as objects with beautiful appearances or as materials of personal development evaluation. They explain the educational logic of the activities to all the members of the school. Therefore, documentation is mostly for the use of educators (Forman e Fyfe, 1998: 164- 165, İnan, 2012: 31).

Thanks to documentation, teachers can review the techniques they have developed or applied. In this regard, documentation serves as a mirror that enables the teachers to gain consciousness about themselves. In this way, the teachers have the opportunity to self-reflect in an objective way. In addition, teachers can contribute to their own professional

development by transferring the classroom environment to various platforms such as professional meetings (İnan, 2012: 34).

Documentation is also useful for parents. Considered as one of the main elements of the Reggio Emilia Approach, the parents are included in the educational environment through documentation. It is also known that teachers in some schools have difficulty to include parents in the educational environment. The physical distance of parents from the school environment restricts the parents in terms of activities they could perform. On the other side, teachers also have some difficulty to transfer the school environment to parents. Serving as a bridge between home and school, documentation strengthens the communication between teachers, students and parents. Thanks to documentation, parents can be informed about what is happening in the classroom. Furthermore, documentation provides the parents with the opportunities to cooperate with the school (İnan, 2012: 34).

Lilian Katz (1998: 183), an American professor of education, suggests that documentation leads to a higher-quality educational program. According to her, documentation leads to further increase in the qualities acquired by children through projects and other works. Malaguzzi emphasizes that children get more curious and attentive thanks to documentation.

In addition, documentation gives parents the opportunity to get detailed information about the experiences of their children at school. Documentation can also be considered as a type of examination that leads to stronger attention to and concentration on determining the understanding skills and intentions of children. It forms the basis for the change and perfection of teaching strategies, and in this respect, it is a source of thought. New ideas arise from it. Besides, documentation contributes to the enlargement of teachers' knowledge about the development process of each child. In other words, documentation gives information to teachers about the development processes and educational statuses. However, documentation cannot be considered as a checklist or test (Katz, 1998: 183).

5.2. Project (Progetto)

Project works, which are one of the most important techniques of the approach, always start with the meetings held by teachers in Reggio Emilia schools. In these meetings, the basic elements of the project works are revised in order to further improve the quality of good project works. A qualified project work contributes to the development of child's personality. Thanks to this technique, interaction is ensured among children who want to achieve common

goals. In this way, children attempt to achieve certain targets by discussing on personal impulses, roles and goals and making decisions. So, project works are carried out through the cooperation of children. When the project meetings are over, teachers generally carry out a pilot study about the project in order to check whether the expectations of children will be realized or not. If this study gives positive results, the students may start works to carry out the project they have designed (Forman, 2010: 243- 244).

The topic of the project works can be anything that may attract the attention of children. For example, a small amusement park can be built for birds in the garden of the school. For this, children are firstly asked for their ideas. Then, the goals of children are enlarged. When the last goal is proposed, the building process of the amusement park starts (Edwards et al., 2010: 89- 90).

Project works also help children acquire social skills. Throughout these works, children are engaged in many activities such as preparation of drafts, discussions, consultation with experts, etc. So, children acquire many different types of skills thanks to project works (Pekdoğan, 2012: 244).

Conclusion

The Reggio Emilia Approach, which emerged in the field of preschool education in Italy, was designed as a method that enables children to direct the process of education, instead of using planned programs. This approach gives children the freedom to act in accordance with their interests and needs. Children cooperate to produce solutions for a situation which they consider as a problem. In this respect, it is clear that the Reggio Emilia Approach is structured as an education system that helps the improvement of problem-solving skills.

As is known, problem solving is an activity that also includes suggestion of solutions. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, solution offers are also produced by children. Children are engaged in problem-solving activities and are encouraged to think independently. In this way, children actively take part in the process of education and improve their sense of responsibility. Inspired by this idea, the Reggio Emilia Approach considers the "project" technique important.

Project technique, one of the forms of learning, includes activities that offer various opportunities for children such as putting into practice the knowledge acquired, planning,

sharing, cooperating and contemplating. Besides, children can express their ideas clearly, take responsibilities, and most importantly, learn everything by doing and experiencing thanks to the project technique. It is concluded that the project, one of the main elements of the Reggio Emilia Approach, is also the technique that best describes the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Approach. In this context, it is considered that the Reggio Emilia Approach can be regarded as a best project based education system.

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