TEACHERS’ UNDERSTANDINGS AND BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate early childhood educators' understandings and beliefs about the role of the early childhood learning environment. In particular, this study was conducted in four Reggio Emilia inspired Canadian childcare and preschool classrooms in order to examine how the fundamental principles of the Reggio Emilia approach were interpreted within a Canadian context. Semi-structured interviews were employed with ten educators to investigate their knowledge, experiences, and beliefs about the learning environment. The data sources included interview notes, audiotapes, and photos of the classroom environment without any child/adult present. The teachers’ beliefs about the role of the learning environment were reflected in materials, aesthetics, and documentation. First, the participants believed that children need to have access to a wide range of materials to stimulate and support their play. Second, several participants stressed the importance of creating the sense of well-being that an aesthetically-pleasing and well-kept classroom provides. Finally, the concept of making learning visible requires a number of participants to collect the children’s works and experiences in as many types of media as possible. The findings suggest that such an interpretation of environment is highly dependent on teachers’ and other adults’ views of development; that variations in practices may reflect cultural differences in both beliefs about, and expectations for, their children. In order to move beyond traditional rituals and responsibilities associated with the early childhood setting, more extensive research in early childhood environments is needed.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We consider the environment to be an essential constituent element of any theoretical or political research in education. We hold to be equally valuable the rationality of the environment, its capacity for harmonious coexistence, and its highly important forms and functions. Moreover, 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. It has been said that the environment should act as a kind of aquarium, which reflects the ideas, ethics, attitudes, and culture of the people who live in it. (Malaguzzi, 1996, p. 40)

As I reflect back to my childhood experiences, I recognize that I spent much of my time creating and building my environment for imaginative play. I remember places such as the playground where I played hide-and-seek or pretended to be a pirate on the swing. I also remember some places that made me feel sad and scared. Clearly, whether our emotional response to a particular place is one of excitement and interest or of fear and trepidation it will determine how we act in such places. Remembering my early experiences has made me curious about the ways in which educators could/can design environments for young children, where they will spend long periods of time, so that they are warm, safe and supported. “The spaces that educators create for children seem to hold enduring memories for them that have a powerful influence on what they will value later in life” (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2000, p. 99).

When educators attend to this particular dimension of the environment they can more clearly see what might be needed to make the environment or space of education a more pleasant one for their students, themselves and the people in the community. As Yi-Fu Tuan (1979) says, “Places are centers of value. They attract or repel in finely shaded
degrees. To attend to them even momentarily is to acknowledge their reality and value” (as cited in Hutchison, 2004, p. 1).

What does the early childhood environment say to our children? Ayers (2001) describes that the features of life in school carry messages about important issues: this is how people learn; this is how people think; this is what you should attend to. These messages constitute a major part of what is learned and what becomes assumed about school. The more aware early childhood educators are of their thoughts and goals, the more intentional they can be in creating spaces that speak and work for them. Edgar Dale (1972) defined learning environment as follows:

The educational environment of an individual cannot be determined exactly by his material surroundings. It is what one interacts with that is important, and one may react directly and concretely, or indirectly and symbolically. The instructional environment, then, is an interacting situation in which the continuity of experience and the relating of experience are critically important. (p. 16)

There are many ways that we can define what classroom environment is. Tarr (2004) defines classroom environment as a public statement about the educational values of the institution and the teacher. Arrangement of physical space—including furniture, what is displayed on the walls, and materials—conveys messages about the relationship between teaching and learning, the image of the child, and the learning within that setting. One of the most important tasks that teachers face, therefore, is designing and establishing a classroom environment that supports children’s learning. But this begs the question: What constitutes a learning environment? The Primary Program: A Framework for Teaching (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BCME], 2000, p. 78) suggests that the complex dimensions of an enriched learning environment fall under four headings, as shown in Figure 1.
A learning environment emphasizes the development and expression of ideas rather than focusing on correctness. This environment captures children’s curiosity, enables them to build on their prior knowledge, and allows them to acquire knowledge and skills in meaningful and appropriately challenging ways. An intellectually stimulating environment allows students to engage in such varied activities as exploring,
interacting, thinking critically, reflecting, playing imaginatively, and representing ideas in varied ways. It can be argued that these four dimensions of an enriched learning environment address the development of the whole child, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Development of the Whole Child (BCME, 2000, pp. 61-67)
Thus, it is clear that an enriched classroom environment can provide “opportunities for students to make sense out of what they are learning and address multiple aspects of development simultaneously (Wolf & Brandt, 1998, as cited in BCME, 2000).

The Reggio Emilia approach to teaching young children identifies an environment as the third teacher. The Reggio Emilia approach puts the natural development of children, as well as the close relationships that they share, with their environment at the center of its philosophy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). However, this raises another question: What constitutes an environment that can be considered a third teacher? As Gandini describes it, “The environment is seen here as educating the child; in fact it is considered as ‘the third educator’ along with a team of two teachers” (Edwards et al., 1998, p.177). Malaguzzi’s idea of an environment serving as the “third educator” was echoed by Reggio educators, who believed that everyone involved in an early childhood classroom (i.e., children, teachers, and parents) has a right to contribute to the construction of the environment (Rinaldi, 2006).

**Theoretical Foundations of the Role of the Environment**

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the works of several philosophers and educators had a major influence on both early childhood education and early childhood classroom environments: Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, Lev Vygotsky, Rudolf Steiner, John Dewey and Howard Gardner (Curtis & Carter, 2003). The contributions of these theorists are discussed in relation to their comments about the environment.

**Environment as an Invitation for Play**

In 1840, German educator, Friedrich Froebel, created the word kindergarten for the Play and Activity Institute for young children that he had founded in 1837. He began
challenging the notion of sterile, passive classroom environments and initiated a movement towards children by providing hands-on learning materials and experiences. The name “Kindergarten” signifies both a garden for children, a location where they can observe and interact with nature, and also a garden of children, where they themselves can grow and develop in freedom from arbitrary political and social imperatives (Weston, 2000).

Thus the very name was intended to suggest growth—growth in the open air with sunshine and rain, under the guidance of an intelligent and understanding gardener who interferes only when the maximum growth of the plant demands pruning or transplanting to a more stimulating environment. (Hill, 1942, p. 1948)

Froebel’s philosophy was based upon democratic conceptions of government and self-active processes, such as experiment, construction, excursions, discovery and invention. He reconstructed the curriculum so that children could learn self-direction and social cooperation in a child society. Moreover, his idea of presenting learning materials as gifts has inspired the concept of offering children aesthetically manipulative materials as invitations to learn (Weston, 2000). This idea has influenced the educators in schools of Reggio Emilia in developing insight concerning the nurturance of children’s lives and their talents (Edwards et al., 1998).

**Environment as an Invitation for Independent Exploration**

Dr. Maria Montessori (1908) had a great desire to inspire the teacher with respect and deep reverence for the nature of the child by comparing the teacher to an astronomer reverently gazing at the heavens through a telescope and recording her observations. Moreover, Montessori’s concept of child-size furnishings and materials arranged with attention to order, aesthetics, and sensory exploration has inspired many teachers in the designing of their classrooms (Curtis & Carter, 2003). Her proposal for a prepared
environment as the “new third factor” in classrooms offered a paradigm shift in education, that is, from focusing only on the relationship between teachers and students to three dynamic relationships (see Figure 3):

**Environment**

![Diagram of the New Classroom Relationships]

**Teacher**  **Student**

Figure 3 The New Classroom Relationships

Montessori’s idea of a prepared environment has influenced many educators in designing and organizing their classrooms. The aim of the prepared environment is to foster the independence and growth of every child. The classroom is a place where children can do things for themselves and be increasingly active. Although the child is encouraged to engage freely in this environment, it must always be the responsibility of the teacher to create a safe environment for the child. Montessori believed that the prepared physical environment should be constructed in proportion to the children and their needs (Standing, 1962).

**Environment as an Invitation for Social Interactions**

If we examine the social setting of the early childhood classrooms that are successful in meeting the needs of children, we see substantial evidence of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory that children learn in a social context:

Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then, on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This applies equally true with regard to voluntary
attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition. (as cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 60)

Vygotsky (1978) viewed thinking as a profoundly social phenomenon not bound by the individual brain or mind; instead, social experience shapes the ways of thinking and interpreting the world available to individuals. Vygotsky believed that personal and social experience could not be separated. Children’s families, communities, socioeconomic status, education, and culture shape the world children inhabit. Their understanding of the world comes, in part, from the values and beliefs of adults and other children in their lives. Children learn from each other everyday. They develop language skills and grasp new concepts as they speak with and listen to others. According to Bodrova and Leong (2003), social context means everything in the children’s environment that has been influenced by their culture and history. Social context influences not only children’s cognitive processes; it also has an influence on children’s attitude and beliefs. The children’s culture and history shape what they know and how they think. Even though each individual’s mind is a product of unique personal experiences, a child’s mind is also formed by social interaction within a specific social context.

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has contributed significantly to our understanding and reconstruction of the role of the teacher, as well as of collaborative learning among children. Vygotsky stated that the ZPD is "the difference between the learner’s actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The ZPD is an important aspect of the sociocultural perspective on the interdependence of the social and the individual. Through the teacher’s constant support
of the student within the ZPD, the student is able to keep attention on the task, is more motivated, and works harder. Within this zone, students are constantly challenged. New information or procedures are introduced within the zone, and the teacher gradually withdraws control and support until the student is able to understand the concept or perform the task independently.

**Environment as an Invitation for Experiencing the Natural World**

Steiner, the founder of the Waldorf philosophy, stressed the importance of developing concepts that can contain growth and change rather than suppress them. Steiner’s philosophy provides room for a new culture to stir, rooted in our human wholeness and lifted by a universe of spirit. In the Waldorf kindergarten, the children enjoy an environment which is meant to provide them with a rich opportunity for exercising their fantasy rather than one programming them in prescribed routines. Steiner’s ideas that education should give children regular experiences with natural materials and the rhythms of the seasons still have influence on the design of early childhood environments (Richards, 1980).

**Environment as an Invitation for Reflecting Democratic Principles**

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey (1916) proposed that education is not a preparation for life, but constitutes a fundamental aspect of the very experience of living. Dewey criticized the cultural bias that presumes that what takes place in schools is separate or removed from what unfolds elsewhere in life. For Dewey, places set aside for formal teaching do differ from the playground, the home, the workplace, and so forth, but only in the sense that they provide a more systematic, reflective opportunity to learn how to learn. In Dewey’s view, democracy requires learning about many things: other
people’s views and hopes, how to resolve problems, how to plan for possibility, how to think about what is good for individuals, communities, and more (Hansen et al., 2006).

According to Dewey’s ideas in *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897), “the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2004, p. 17). Dewey suggested that the school and classroom should reflect democratic principles by offering students appropriate opportunities to formulate their own environment for social living. A less effective form of learning takes place where hierarchy characterizes the child/adult relationship. Achieving a more democratic experience of school for children will only succeed when teachers incorporate children’s voices into the designing and organizing of learning environments.

**Environment as a Place for Enhancing Distinctive Ability**

Howard Gardner’s (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI theory) presents a powerful vision of the different ways that individuals learn. MI theory provides convincing arguments that children have a far wider range of abilities than are generally valued in school or measured by IQ and other standardized tests. Gardner (1983) suggested that children as young as four could show distinctive styles of cognition. Some children interact with their environment mainly through language use, others through spatial or visual venues, and others through social interactions (Gardner, 1991). When applied to early childhood education, this idea suggests that each child exhibits a distinctive profile of different abilities, or multiple intelligences; moreover, rather than being fixed, these intelligences can be enhanced by an educational environment rich in stimulating materials and activities (Chen, Krechevsky, & Viens, 1998).
Environment as the Third Teacher

Reggio Emilia educators have always been attentive to the subject of spaces and to environment in education. Jerome Bruner (1998) describes the schools of Reggio Emilia as a special kind of place, one in which young children are invited to grow in mind, sensibility, and belonging to a broader community. Malaguzzi’s (1998) idea of “atelier as a place of provocation” has challenged many Reggio Emilia teachers to re-examine every detail of the environment. Malaguzzi (1998) wrote:

We would have constructed a new type of school made of spaces where the hand of children could be active for “messing about”. With no possibility of boredom, hands and minds would engage each other with great, liberating merriment in the way ordained by biology and evolution. (pp. 73-74)

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education begins with a view of the child as a competent and complex social being who is motivated by and learns from social interaction and relationships with others (Edwards et al., 1998). This conviction is manifested in a strong community approach to the education and care of young children. Malaguzzi, who believed that relationship is a necessity of life, inspired the Reggio Emilia philosophy. According to Fraser and Gestwicki (2000), the importance of relationships is central to the Reggio Emilia approach, that is, through relationships with teachers, the atelierista and each other, each child’s special qualities are recognized and nurtured. Leila Gandini (1993) wrote:

When one observes children and adults in the schools of Reggio Emilia one perceives that there is a particular connection between time and space and that the environment truly works. The consideration of the children’s own needs and rhythms shapes that arrangement of space and the physical environment, while in turn, the time at disposal allows for the use and enjoyment, at a child’s pace, of such carefully thought out space. (p. 140)
Purpose of the Study

The study's purpose is to investigate preschool teachers’ and early childhood educators' understandings and beliefs about the role of the early childhood classroom environment for young children’s learning. As a researcher, I also want to understand how educators interpret the meaning of the learning environment (physical environment, emotional environment, cognitive environment, and/or philosophical environment).

Hypothesis

The philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Approach places significant 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. Gandini (1998) described, “The environment is seen here as educating the child; in fact it is considered as ‘the third educator’ along with a team of two teachers” (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 177). Therefore, I hypothesize that teachers' knowledge, experiences and beliefs about the learning environment will impact the organization of the early childhood classroom environment that responds to the child's needs for security and autonomy.

Research Questions

This research was an exploratory study examining preschool/childcare educators’ thoughts and beliefs about the potential of the classroom environment for young children. The following questions guided the study:

1. What are the teachers’ understanding of their program’s philosophy, Reggio Emilia approach, and contributions of the early childhood program?
2. How do children use or interact with the learning environment?
3. How do teachers understand the term environment for children's learning and what do they believe constitutes such an environment?

4. What do teachers identify as the challenges in creating and working in the environment for children's learning?

**Significance**

This study is addressed primarily to teachers and those preparing to teach in any of the various settings encompassed by the term early childhood education. Although this research is addressed mainly to teachers and prospective teachers in early childhood programs, my hope is that at least two other groups of readers will find it valuable: parents of young children and others who facilitate children’s transition to, and support their education within, early childhood settings. It will not only help to increase the teachers’ level of awareness and understanding of some of the issues surrounding the teachers’ beliefs in educational philosophy, its findings will also provide the teachers with feedback on their interpretations and understanding of the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Early childhood professionals attempting to implement the Reggio Emilia approach in their classrooms must contend with the competing professional paradigms of early childhood education. In this study, I describe the beliefs and understandings of 10 early childhood educators to give some perspectives of how these tensions play out in preschool and daycare settings. Though the understandings of the teachers studied here embody some aspects of Reggio Emilia philosophy, they are also marked by problems with personal interpretation, partial adoption, and inconsistency in implementation of Reggio Emilia principles. Analysis of these participants’ understandings provides insight
into the general challenge of interpretation of Reggio Emilia philosophy as well as into the specific challenges facing early childhood educators committed to provide learning environments for young children.

**Outline of the Thesis**

Chapter 2 offers a review of the theoretical perspectives and research findings relevant to this study. In the first part I focus on different theories and research pertaining to the role of the classroom environment on children’s learning. The second part provides historical background, basic principles, and the role of the environment as reflected in the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy of early childhood education.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology adopted for the study. I begin with a discussion of the research design, arguing that the nature of the research topic requires a qualitative approach. Issues around the data analysis and the trustworthiness of the study are discussed. Next, I present the information about the context of the study, data collection procedures, and analysis of the data.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study in three parts: the participants’ reflections on the educational spaces that resonate with a Reggio Emilia approach; their perspective on relationships within the spaces; and the dominance of developmentally appropriate practice in the early childhood field.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the research findings by comparing and contrasting the participants’ understandings about the learning space and the philosophy of Reggio Emilia in Italy. Next, I present several insights and implications for teachers and parents in creating an environment for young children. Finally, I propose further study needed in the conception of space for young children.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the focal points of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, as Loris Malaguzzi wrote, is the image of a child, who, right from the moment of birth, is so engaged in developing a relationship with the world and intent on experiencing the world that he develops a complex system of abilities, learning strategies, and ways of organizing relationships. (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 117)

This chapter offers a review of theoretical perspectives and research findings relevant to this study. In particular, the chapter focuses on theory and research pertaining to the role of the classroom environment on children’s learning and the role of the environment as reflected in the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy of early childhood education. In part one, I provide the philosophical and psychological perspectives of theorists that have contributed to the Reggio Emilia approach. In part two, I discuss the characteristics of early childhood education and developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) that can be found in North America. In part three, I present the ideas that are integral to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Finally, I discuss the role of the environment in the Reggio Emilia approach.

Theorists that have contributed to the Reggio Emilia Philosophy

A willingness to border cross, driven by an endless curiosity and a desire to open up new perspectives, has contributed to Reggio Emilia approach’s continuation and vigour. The educators in Reggio have embraced theories and concepts from many different fields, such as science, architecture, and philosophy. They have reflected upon these ideas, questioned them, and experimented with them in order to create their own pedagogical practice and meaning.
Jean Piaget: Cognitive Constructivism

Traditionally, teachers have conceived their roles to be concerned with transmitting the logical structures of their knowledge, and directing students through rational inquiry toward discovering the predetermined universal knowledge/truths expressed in the form of laws, principles, rules, and algorithms. Constructivist theory has provided educators with an understanding of the nature of knowledge development. At the level of the individual learner, there has been a realization that meaningful learning is a cognitive process of making sense, or purposeful problem solving of the experiential world of the individual in relation to the totality of the individual’s lifetime, regardless of the learning context (Glasersfeld, 1992).

Jean Piaget believed that the central problem of the pedagogy of teaching is linked to the fundamental epistemological problem of the nature of knowledge. According to Piaget (1971):

The ideas behind the knowledge-copy concept have not been abandoned by everyone, far from it, and they continue to provide the inspiration for many educational methods, even, quite often, for those intuitive methods in which the image and audio-visual presentations play a role that certain people tend to look upon as the ultimate triumph of educational progress. (p. 28)

A child’s mind is neither a miniature model of an adult’s mind, nor an empty vessel that gradually fills up with information. Children’s thinking differs from adult thinking because they have different ways of viewing the world and of determining reality. Piaget proposed a theory of developmental stages in which the child is seen as an active participant in the interaction between the biological self and the environment. Piaget asserted that each stage has unique qualities, is based on preceding stages, form an
invariant sequence, and that development through the sequence is found in all cultures (Kutnick, 1988).

The foundation of a child’s learning about the world is that at each stage of development he or she actively engages in a construction of reality. Development takes place through personal maturation, experiences and social interactions. There is some knowledge which traditional teaching has not differentiated, but which requires different learning processes by the child. Some aspects can be taught in the traditional sense, but others must be learned through hands-on experience. Children learn best through doing rather than hearing. They learn at their own rates and through their own interests. Therefore, it is a teacher’s responsibility to plan and provide a variety of experiences which will meet the students’ individual needs and modes of learning. Piaget (1971) stated that:

Though the new methods of education may thus be defined according to the genuine activity they postulate in the child and by the reciprocal character of the relation they establish between the subjects being educated and the society of which they are destined to form a part, nothing could in fact be less new than such systems. (p. 139)

Like other radical educational practices in the 1970s, the teachers in Reggio were inspired by Piaget’s epistemology and his view that the aim of teaching is to provide conditions for learning. Malaguzzi (1993) mentioned Piaget’s influence on his work as follows:

We maintain intact our sense of gratitude toward Piaget. If Jean Jacques Rousseau invented a revolutionary conception of childhood without dealing with children, Piaget was the first to give them an identity based on a close analysis of their development, by observing and talking to children over extended periods of time. (pp. 75-76)
Later on, the teachers became aware of certain weaknesses in Piaget’s theory, including the way in which constructivism isolates the child from social interaction. As a result, the teachers in Reggio started to question certain aspects of Piaget’s constructivist theory and started to experiment with what it would mean to work from another idea. The teachers came to adopt Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective, where knowledge is seen as constituted in a context through a process of meaning making in continuous encounters with others and the world. The teachers in Reggio believe that the child and the teacher are co-constructers of knowledge and culture (Rinaldi, 2006).

**Lev Vygotsky: Socio-Cognitive Constructivism**

Vygotsky believed that children construct their own understandings and do not passively reproduce what is presented to them. Cognitive construction is always socially mediated; it is influenced by present and past social interactions (Karpov, 2005). The human mind is the product of both human history and a person’s individual history. Each individual’s mind is a product of unique personal experiences. Therefore, a child’s mind is the result of his interactions with others within a specific social context.

Children acquire a particular mental process by sharing or using it when interacting with others. The ideas of socially shared cognition is very different from the idea of cognition once commonly accepted in Western psychology, where cognition is viewed as a set of internal mental processes accessible only to the individual. For Vygotsky, all mental processes exist first in a shared space, and then move to an individual plane. Shared activity is the means that facilitates a child’s internalization of mental processes. Although Vygotsky believed that there were maturational prerequisites
for specific cognitive accomplishments, he did not believe that maturation totally
determines development (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

Vygotsky (1981) stated that “humans master themselves from the outside--
through psychological tools” (p. 141). Mental tools enable humans to plan ahead, to solve
problems, and to work with others towards a common goal. Vygotsky believed that when
children have acquired mental tools, they can then use the tools in an independent
manner. Children begin by sharing the process of using the tools with others; the process
is interpersonal at this stage. As children incorporate the tools into their own thought
processes, a shift occurs and the tools become intrapersonal or individual. Children can
use the tools independently (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

This social constructivist perspective opened the teachers in Reggio to precious
insights. Since then, these insights have been significant in their practice, for example,
the relationship between thought and language, and how action is mediated by cultural
tools and symbols. The process of co-construction has much in common with Vygotsky’s
concept of the zone of proximal development.

The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet
matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow
but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the
“buds” or “flowers” of development rather than the “fruit” of development.
(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

**John Dewey: Progressivism**

John Dewey proposed the most philosophical challenge to a traditional approach
to education. Inspired by Rousseau, Dewey viewed the child as inherently social and
good, able to progress to a state of autonomy and freedom if he or she is allowed to
develop naturally. Dewey argued that it was the educator’s business to arrange for the
kind of experiences which are more than immediately enjoyable; the educator wants to promote desirable future experiences for the children. Dewey (1963) stated the idea of progressive education as follows, “Just because traditional education was a matter of routine in which the plans and programs were handed down from the past, it does not follow that progressive education is a matter of planless improvisation” (p. 28).

Dewey (1963) suggested that the school and classroom should reflect democratic principles by offering students appropriate opportunities to formulate their own rules for social living. Dewey’s democratic principle focuses on serving the needs of students, teachers, and society. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, to care deeply about the needs of others, and to embrace life imaginatively as life-long learners (Flinders & Thornton, 2004).

Progressive education has a dynamic quality, focusing on the interactions of the student, teacher, and subject matter. This means creating school experiences or environments that will help children grow intellectually, ethically, emotionally, and aesthetically. Dewey (1963) proposed that:

It is to emphasize the fact, first, that young people in traditional schools do have experiences; and, secondly, that the trouble is not the absence of experiences, but their defective and wrong character—wrong and defective from the standpoint of connection with further experience. (p. 27)

Throughout the history of Dewey’s Laboratory School, the teachers spent time discussing and reflecting on their practices, learning from one another and from the children. There was a sense of development in the activities children engaged in as they moved through the school. The child’s early school experiences reflected household occupations such as cooking, construction, and sewing. These occupations expanded to include immediate sources of such things as food and textiles, the fundamental means of
producing basic supplies and requirements of life. According to Dewey, the occupations are the key focal points for inquiry in the curriculum (Wolfe, 2002).

Dewey’s (1963) theory of inquiry focuses on both mind and knowledge as instruments for dealing with the situations of life. Knowledge is the direct by-product of human interaction with the environment and inseparable from the activity that produced it. Acting upon the environment results in experience; therefore, the person learns the effect of actions on the environment or situation. Dewey (1963) regarded environment as both physical and social in nature, believing that interactions with both are educational.

The conclusion is that in what are called the new schools, the primary source of social control resides in the very nature of the work done as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility. Most children are naturally “sociable.” Isolation is even more irksome to them than to adults. A genuine community life has its ground in this natural sociability. But community life does not organize itself in an enduring way purely spontaneously. It requires thought and planning ahead. The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control. (p. 56)

The educators in Reggio are inspired by Dewey’s view that learning is an active process and not a transmission of pre-packaged knowledge. Dewey integrated the dualisms between content and method, process and product, mind and body, science and art, theory and practice. The teachers in Reggio believe that knowledge is constructed through children’s participation in activities and pragmatic experimentation.

**Patty Smith Hill: Community Involvement**

Patty Smith Hill (1942) proposed improved methods of teaching with new materials and equipment. These improvements may be listed under the following headings:
1. Larger and more artistic play materials and equipment;

2. Improved methods of teaching through utilization of the laws of learning, as opposed to traditional methods;

3. Emphasis upon sanitation and health in the new curriculum;

4. Improved standards of literature and art in the types of stories, songs and dramatization used;

5. Increasing opportunities for first-hand experience in nature study and elementary science;

6. Emphasis on guidance through increasing utilization of self-expression and social cooperation in the social organization of the class;

7. Improved methods of parental guidance, using individual and group conferences with teachers and parents in coordinating home and school;

8. Unified curricula and cooperation between the nursery school, kindergarten and primary grades. (p. 1965)

When Hill was teaching at Teachers College, at Columbia University, she investigated the Speyer School in Harlem, where most children came from poor and immigrant families. The school promoted ethnic, cultural and racial awareness to enhance self-esteem, expand the children’s experiences, support tolerance, and to form a common base among the people. The children stayed with the same teacher for five years to build relationships and improve learning. One of Hill’s principles in early childhood education was observing and studying children, especially in their play life. Hill suggested that teachers needed to be researchers in their own classrooms in order to grow in their ability to see and study children (Wolfe, 2002).
Throughout her life, Patty Smith Hill promoted democratic and creative classroom methods. Hill was also particularly interested in cultural differences and in celebrations, and included these in her teaching. Her reflections on education have been expanded from being child-centered to family-centered, and finally, community-centered. Her ideology was to encompass all three interacting with each other. Hill believed that parents and teachers alone could not address the needs of the whole child. Children need care and attention from the community: physicians, dieticians, social workers, psychologists, artists, and other professionals. According to Hill (1942):

As the school and home agree on the common attitudes, ideas and objectives which must be disseminated in their efforts to protect and develop all the children of all the people, whether princes or paupers, we may hope for a better day, when society shall adopt and apply the appeal Froebel made to his own generation: “Come, let us live with our children.” With his deep reverence for all childhood and the rights of all life to grow, Froebel cast aside man’s artificial distinctions between weeds and flowers, appealing to parents and teachers in these words: “Take care of my flowers, but don’t forget my weeds.” (p. 1972)

Susan Isaacs: Observation and Documentation

Susan Isaacs was a teacher, psychologist, and therapist. Her studies of child development and the genesis of emotional disturbances at the Malting House School influenced theory and practice of nursery-infant education in England. Isaacs believed that learning must be active and experiential. She encouraged children to find out for themselves rather than rely only on the knowledge of the teacher. Through careful and rigorous observations and recording of the classroom life of young children, a teacher will be able to respond to the individual children and move easily with the children into an avenue of exploration (Firlik, 1994).

The development of a distinctive pedagogy is derived from Isaacs’ teaching. She believed that children use spoken language as a mean of understanding and growth and
that movement is critical for full development in young children. From her perspective, movement should be a part of the educational practices of the school. Children should have freedom to talk and move openly in the classroom. They should feel free to gather the needed materials to complete a task or start a project. For these reasons, the classroom should have light and moveable furniture so the teacher and children can arrange the classroom to support the learning of the children. In addition, children should have access to quality materials and various supplies. This is a form of classroom environment built upon the active learning principal (Firlik, 1994).

**Early Childhood Education in North America**

Programs for young children have various names: early childhood, preschool, Head Start, Pre-K, and kindergarten. Regardless of these differences, however, many classrooms for young children in North America share similar characteristics. First, I discuss the nature of early childhood education in North America. Then, I present the different approaches in the field of early education that reflect different theories of child development and of learning. Finally, I describe developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) that is reflected in all four of the areas of early childhood education: primary education, kindergarten, nursery or preschool, and daycare.

**Early Childhood Education and the Climate of Change**

In the 1960s the question posed for the school was, “Can education solve the problems of society?” As problems persisted and worsened, it appeared to many that the impact of schooling could not compensate for home environmental influences. As public schools experienced ever growing financial stress, earlier hopes for the schools to extend their responsibilities to young children grew dim. Far more middle and upper income
than low income families enrolled their children in preschool programs. Quality daycare provisions were increasingly in demand, hard to find, and harder still to afford. The school reform movement of the 1980s impacted upon early childhood education in many ways. To the extent that early childhood education’s role is seen as preparing children for subsequent schooling, there is a tendency to impose learning requirements upon children at increasingly younger ages (Safford, 1989).

**Theoretical Traditions in Early Childhood Education in North America**

The views of the nature of childhood and of the learning process have been associated with different theories of child development and of learning provided for young children. Safford (1989) identified six basic theoretical positions:

1. *The philosophical or moral approach*, associated with the pioneering work of Froebel, “the father of the kindergarten.”
2. *The developmental approach or normative approach*, most closely identified with maturational theory of development and the description of age-specific norms provided by Arnold Gesell.
5. *The behavioural approach*, derived from principles articulated by B. F. Skinner and typically associated with practices in many early intervention programs and the concept of direct instruction.

In general, theories of children's development differ in their relative emphasis on either innate, biologically determined influences, or environmental influences. The above positions are not mutually exclusive, but tend to be reflected in various combinations in early childhood programs. The first three approaches (philosophical/moral; developmental/normative; and psychoanalytic) tend to emphasize common developmental themes. They imply a role for early childhood education that involves sensitivity to the uniqueness of the early childhood period of development and response to young children's developmental needs. The compensatory and behavioural approaches, on the other hand, imply a different role: that of altering the course of children's development (Safford, 1989).

In contrast, the cognitive psychology approach is based on an interaction of children's development. Contemporary early childhood education has been significantly affected by Piaget's observations concerning how children learn. In Piaget's view children have a very active role: the child constructs knowledge from within. Experiences with the social and physical environment are important because they provide the occasions for the child to restructure knowledge. Kamii and De Vries (1978) advised the teacher, when planning direct experiential activities, to view them as providing the context for children's social interaction, rather than the reverse. They stress that social interaction and cooperation in the preschool occur as a result of activities that require children to be active in pursuing knowledge. That is, social interactive aspects are secondary, while individual and small group experiential learning are both important in
their own right and also instrumental in creating a natural social context for learning (Kamii & De Vries, 1978).

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)**

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published the first definitive position on DAP in 1986. DAP refers to applying child development knowledge in making thoughtful and appropriate decisions about early childhood program practices. Since its publication, DAP has become the most influential document guiding the field of early childhood education (Charelesworth, 1998). There are two dimensions of developmental appropriateness: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. As Bredekamp (1987) mentioned in the opening of the NAEYC position statement:

Human development research indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children during the first nine years of life. These predictable changes occur in all domains of development—physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. Knowledge of typical development of children within the age span served by the program provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences. (1987, p. 2)

There are basic principles of child development that begin every text or course in development (Follari, 2007):

1. There is a predictable sequence in development.
2. Development at one stage lays the basis for later development.
3. There are optimal periods in development.
4. Development results from the interaction of biological factors (maturation) and environmental factors (learning).
5. Development proceeds as an interrelated whole, with all aspects (physical, cognitive, emotional, social) influencing the others.

6. Each individual develops according to a particular timetable and pace.

7. Development proceeds from simple to complex, and from general to specific.

Charlesworth (1998) proposed that DAP could apply to everyone, whatever their socioeconomic status, culture, race, gender, age or special needs and certain developmental tasks, identified by Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget, are common across cultures. While many early childhood professionals embraced the DAP document, others criticized it for using developmental theory as the conceptual base and its rules or standards that educators were all supposed to agree on. Sally Lubeck (1998) described her doubts about DAP:

The guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice rest upon modern assumptions that encourage us to espouse general, broad-based knowledge and principles. Yet being certain, finding comfort in consensus, may make us too sure that what we know is best for ourselves is also best for others. Uncertainty, by contrast, is unsettling: it makes us wonder, listen and try new things. It opens us up to the possibility that things can be other than they seem. (p.9)

Lubeck (1998) suggested that her alternative vision for the future might enable early childhood professionals to work collaboratively and to interpret pedagogies that more adequately address the diverse needs of children and families in our rapidly changing world. As teaching becomes more complicated, early childhood educators need opportunities to meet regularly with other teachers and parents. In this way, we can bring various perspectives to bear on complex situations. Instead of believing that values and understandings need to be shared and differences resolved, educators might come to see
that the different views and practices within a teaching community are themselves a resource.

**Ideas Integral to the Reggio Emilia philosophy**

Jerome Bruner (1998), the American psychologist, argued that you will understand the municipal schools if you understand Reggio Emilia, the city from which they derive. More than 30 years, the Reggio Emilia approach evolved its own distinctive set of philosophical and pedagogical assumptions, methods of school organization, and principles of environmental design.

**History of Reggio Emilia**

Reggio Emilia is a city in Northern Italy with a population of around 150,000, a flourishing community with a long history. By the first decade of the 20th century, Reggio Emilia had a population of around 70,000. With its historically strong anti-imperial and anti-establishment leanings, a socialist tradition was evident in the city. The first municipal school for young children, the Villa Gaida inspired by the socialist mayor of Reggio, was opened in 1912. The mayor wanted a school that clearly expressed important ideas in socialist thinking. Education was considered as a tool against poverty, ignorance, and arrogance (Rinaldi, 2006).

In the early 1920s, the first act of the Fascist governor was to close this school and others like it (Rinaldi, 2006). After its emergence in 1923, Mussolini's fascist regime oppressed the people in Reggio Emilia because of their disposition and traditions, but Reggio people didn't passively accept their authoritarian leader. Twenty years of resistance led to a fight for liberation. A revolutionary educational system emerged from Reggio Emilia after the Second World War ravaged the city's population and landscape.
Reflecting the city's democratic and socialist disposition, groups of parents, teachers, and children sketched a plan for the reconstruction of society through building and running a school for young children. In a small village called Villa Cella, people had come together and decided that they would sell an abandoned war tank, a few trucks, and some horses to begin the school construction. As Malaguzzi (1993) put it:

> It is the spring of 1945. Destiny must have wanted me to be part of an extraordinary event. I hear that in a small village called Villa Cella, a few miles from the town of Reggio Emilia, people decided to build and run a school for young children. That idea seems incredible to me! I rush there on my bike and I discover that it is all quite true. (pp. 41-43)

What happened at Villa Cella, the first school that was created and run by parents for young children, was the first spark. Other schools that were founded and run by parents were opened in the poor area surrounding the city; however, some of the schools would not survive because of difficult ordeals and poverty. Some of these preschools continued until 1967, when they were handed over to the city government. Malaguzzi (1993) always remembered the legacy of those committed citizens who started the preschools. He said:

> But the same events granted us something else right away, to which we have always tried to remain faithful. This something came out of requests made by mothers and fathers, whose lives and concerns were focused upon their children. They asked for nothing less than that this school, which they had built with their own hands, be a different kind of school, a school that could educate their children in a different way from before. (Malaguzzi, p. 51)

After Malaguzzi finished his psychology program at the National Center for Research in Rome, he came back to work at both the mental health center for children with difficulties and the small parent-run schools. Working side by side with parents, Malaguzzi and other teachers realized that “things about children and for children are
only learned from children” (p. 44). This principle turned out to be an important part of Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Women played an important part in the socialist movement in establishing the idea of quality as a right. As women became more aware of their rights, they demanded high quality places to leave their children so they could work. As the result of the inspiration, strength and initiative of the Union of Italian Women (UDI), workers, and farmers, the municipality of Reggio took the decision to open Robinson, the first municipal preschool, in 1963 (Rinaldi, 2006).

From the hope of bringing change and creating a new world free from oppression, the teachers were involved in becoming a part of the public consciousness. By bringing children and tools in a truck, children had their class in open spaces, in public parks, or in the square. The children were happy and the people were surprised and asked a lot of questions. It was a time of continuous adjustment of ideas, project works, and attempts. The teachers preserved the decision to learn from children, events, and families, and to recognize the need to sustain each child’s spontaneous curiosity at a high level (Malaguzzi, 1993).

A teachers’ movement was active in Italy around the goal of innovation in education in the 1950s and early 1960s. After the Liberation, some of the teachers’ ideas found inspiration in the works of John Dewey, and in theory and practice by the work of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and others. Loris Malaguzzi, who became a leader along with others, wanted to bring innovation to schools for young children. Through all the tremendous economic development along with the bargaining power between the conservative Catholic forces and the progressive socialist movement, a series of national
laws were passed between 1968 and 1971, which included the establishment of free
preschools and infant-toddler centers. By the year 2002, there were 21 municipal
preschools and 13 municipal infant-toddler centers providing care for children from
infant to 6 years of age (Gandini & Golhaber, 2001).

The Aims of Early Childhood Education in Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia is a unique theory about practice in working with young children
and their families, constructed from a very particular historical, cultural, and political
context. The educational system attempted to forge a better society through the
previously ignored innocence and intuitive intelligence of children. It is in this distinct
historical context that a journey into such a remarkable educational and cultural
experience as the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia becomes a shared experience in a
democratic society where citizens take responsibility for all their children (Gandini,
1993). Malaguzzi (1993) defined the Reggio Emilia approach in the following way:

We think of a school for young children as an integral living organism, as a place
of shared lives and relationships among many adults and very many children. We
think of school as a sort of construction in motion, continuously adjusting itself.
Certainly we have to adjust our system from time to time while the organism
travels on its life course, just as those pirate ships were once compelled to repair
their sails all the while keeping on their course at sea. It has also always been
important to us that our living system of schooling expands toward the world of
the families, with their right to know and to participate. And then it expands
toward the city, with its own life, its own patterns of development, its own
institutions, as we have asked the city to adopt the children as bearers and
beneficiaries of their own specific rights. (p. 56)

Loris Malaguzzi, along with a group of devoted and competent educators, parents
and other citizens, supported the work toward creating very high quality early childhood
programs, constantly updating the teacher’s preparation, and researching new avenues of
Our goal is to build an amiable school, where children, teachers, and families feel at home. Such a school requires careful thinking and planning concerning procedures, motivations, and interests. It must embody ways of getting along together, of intensifying relationships among the three central protagonists, of assuring complete attention to the problems of education, and of activating participation and research. These are the most effective tools for all those concerned: children, teachers, and parents - to become more united and aware of each other’s contributions. (p. 58)

Reggio Emilia educators have no intention of suggesting that their program should be looked at as a model to be replicated in other countries. Rather, their program should be considered as an educational experience that consists of reflection, practice, and further careful observation in a program that is continuously renewed and re-adjusted. Malaguzzi (1993) mentioned, “We think of school as a sort of construction in motion, continuously adjusting itself. Certainly we have to adjust our system from time to time while the organism travels on its life course…” (p. 56).

After decades of innovation and experimentation, notable interest is being expressed by early childhood educators, administrators and researchers around the world as a result of two events: Newsweek magazine’s (1991) description of the schools in Reggio Emilia as “the best early childhood programs in the world,” and the nation-wide exhibition of children’s work from the schools of Reggio Emilia, “The Hundred Languages of Children” (Gandini, 1993).

**Basic Principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach**

**The image of the child.** Reggio educators emphasize that they view children as being rich, strong, and powerful. The image is based on the understanding that all children are intelligent, meaning that all children embark on a course of making meaning of the world through a constant process of constructing knowledge, identity, and value. According to Malaguzzi (1993), those who studied children seriously would discover the
children’s surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities linked with an inexhaustible need for expression and realization. Reggio educators’ conviction is that children who are born in any culture and any place have a common gift, namely, potential and competency. Although Reggio teachers believe in the universality of children’s potential, they are very cautious concerning differences in young children’s cognitive style that reflect their historical and cultural context. Following on this social construction, the image of the rich child, Reggio teachers have struggled to show the potentialities of each child and to give each child the right to be listened to and to be a recognized citizen in the community.

Rinaldi (2006) discussed the cultural and individual construction of the child that Reggio educators call ‘the image of the child,’ that is, what we know and accept about children. “This image will determine our way of relating with children, our way of forming our expectations for them and the world that we are able to build for them” (p. 91). In Reggio, the teachers are familiar with the image of the child as competent in interpreting and constructing relationships with the world. Each child is unique in engaging in social interaction, in establishing relationships, and in constructing their learning while negotiating with everything the environment brings to them. The teachers in Reggio are deeply aware of children’s potentials, so they construct all their work and prepare the environment to respond appropriately to children.

**Relationship.** School is centred to not only in the relationship between educator and child, but also in the relationship between the child, teachers, and parents. Rinaldi (2006) proposed that school for young children is therefore “a system of communication, of socialisation, of personalisation. This well-being of relationship is closely associated
with the quantity and quality of: a) the communication that takes place between the parties, b) the knowledge and awareness which the parties have of their mutual needs and satisfaction, and c) the opportunities for meeting and getting together with arise in a system of permanent relationships” (pp. 27-28).

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**Figure 4 A System of Permanent Relationship**

**Learning.** Malaguzzi (1993) believed that what children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught. Rather, it is in large part due to the children’s own doing as a consequence of their communications and concrete experiences. Children always take an active role in the construction and acquisition of learning and understanding. Once the children perceive themselves as authors or inventors, their motivation and interest in learning will expand. Yet, Malaguzzi didn’t wish to overvalue the child’s control of this interaction or to devalue the role of the adult. The important point is the two-way direction of interaction.

**The role of teachers.** Teachers are seen as those who construct and constitute the connection of relationship to transform them into significant experiences of interactions and communication. The teacher’s professional identity is viewed not only in relation to
the children, his/her colleagues, and to the parents, but also in relation to his/her own identity and personal experience. Rinaldi (2006) mentioned, “In fact, I believe the profession of pedagogista can only be constructed through constant exchange with teachers and then with children and their families” (p. 54).

In order to maintain the participation of families, teachers must possess habits of questioning their certainties, growth of sensitivity and availability, and communications skills to talk, listen, and learn from parents. By documenting the children’s experiences at school, teachers prepare a flow of quality information targeted at the parents, and appreciated by their colleagues and children. Teachers are encouraged to engage in the challenge of longitudinal observations and research projects concerning the experiences of children.

Co-teaching, or collegial work of teachers, represents a deliberate break from the traditional professional and cultural isolation of teachers. To work in pairs, and then among pairs, produces tremendous advantages, both educationally and psychologically, for teachers as well as for children. Reggio Emilia educators support teacher development through in-service training because the teachers need to grow in their competencies through their experiences, thoughts, reflections, and interpretations.

One of the roles of a teacher is to understand children as producers, not consumers of knowledge. The teachers are encouraged to teach nothing to children except what children can learn by themselves. Furthermore, the teachers must be aware of their perception and actions in order to enter into relationships with the children. In order to call forth the children’s infinite act of intelligence, the teachers need to realize the importance of listening to children and the significance of offering a wide variety of
options to choose from. Finally, they need to know that teacher’s professional growth comes from both individual effort and discussion with colleagues, parents, and experts.

**The role of parents.** The Reggio Emilia approach has a focus on each child, not considered in isolation, but in relation with the family, with other children, with the teachers, with the environment of schools, and with the wider society. Parents are considered an important component of the program, and many of the parents are part of the advisory committees running each preschool. Parents are seen as competent and active parts of their children’s learning experience. Reggio educators continuously maintain and reinvent the network of communication and encounters by having meetings with families to discuss curriculum. Teachers ask for the family’s cooperation in organizing activities, setting up space, and preparing the welcoming of new children. The parents’ participation is expected and supported. There are many forms of parent participation: day-to-day interaction, work in the schools, discussions of educational and psychological issues, special events, excursions, and celebrations. Rinaldi (2006) suggested that:

> There is no such thing as the parent. There are parents, or rather people who are also parents who should be credited with having an educational sensibility toward and concern about the child, albeit sometimes unexpressed or which we may be unable to see. We need to learn to see the parents’ explicit and implicit needs and respond to them with new and effective answers. (p. 36)

**The importance of continuity.** The idea of continuity of thoughts and actions is a complex and composite experience between teachers from *nidi* (a centre for children from around 3 months up to 3 years) and *scuole dell’infanzia* (a centre for children from 3 years up to compulsory school age of 6) and with parents. The children’s own sense of time and personal rhythm are considered in planning and carrying out experiences and
projects. The continuity sought by the child has to do with being part of a project, a life project, where the various parties that are involved in the project (their families, *nidi*, *scuole dell’infanzia*, and people in their community) know each other, work together, and communicate with each other. Continuity makes a reference to quality by helping children search for their identity and meaning of their past, present, and future (Rinaldi, 2006).

Even though the environment will change according to the developmental needs and interests of the child, the teachers get to know the personal time of the children and each child’s particular characteristics because children stay with the same teachers and the same group of children for three-year cycles (infancy-to-3 and 3-to-6). Rinaldi mentioned the tension of the increasing risk of standardisation of *scuole dell’infanzia* which would make them like compulsory elementary schools. In the image of the public, the *nido* appears as a place for caretaking, an expensive place that does not educate. This tension gives rise to a completely distorted approach to the relationship and continuity between *nido* and *scuole dell’infanzia* by isolating the *nido* from every other part of the educational system. “Continuity meant not in the sense of standardisation but as a coherent and coordinated development of the educational process” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 107).

**Cooperation and collaboration.** Cooperation at all levels in *nidi* and *scuole dell’infanzia* is one of the goals that Reggio teachers have set for themselves. The teachers work in co-teaching pairs in each classroom and they plan with other colleagues and the families. All the staff members of the school meet once a week to discuss and broaden their ideas. They also participate together in in-service training. The strong
collegial relationship that is maintained with all teachers and staff relies on the collaborative discussion and interpretation of both teachers’ and children’s work. The process of exchanging information provides ongoing practice and theoretical enrichment (Malaguzzi, 1993).

A team of pedagogical coordinators, called pedagogisti, support this cooperative system by supporting relationships among all teachers, parents, community members, and city administrators. The team of pedagogisti meets once a week with the director to discuss policy and problems related to the whole network of Reggio schools. Each pedagogista supports teachers in three or four centres to sustain and implement the philosophy of the system by continuous reflection and enrichment. The pedagogista has the complex and multifaceted task of promoting a cultural and social growth of systems for young children. This entire educational experience builds itself inside a systemic outlook. Malaguzzi (1993) wrote:

Thus, we have put together a mechanism combining places, roles, and functions that have their own timing, but that can be interchanged with one another in order to generate ideas and actions. All this works within a network of cooperation and interactions that produces for the adults, but above all for the children, a feeling of belonging in a world that is alive, welcoming, and authentic. (p. 58)

The Environment in the Reggio Emilia Approach

According to Rinaldi (1998), many spaces for young children have been constructed in “hand-me-down” buildings. It has often been the result of random factors and a gross lack of awareness and understanding about early childhood educational philosophy. In order to create better spaces for children, Reggio educators are searching for a space in relation with children’s experiences, times, and culture.
In Reggio Emilia, designing a school environment means, “creating a space of life and of the future which required the shared research of architecture, pedagogy, and the other disciplines in order to find better spaces, the one that is capable of generating its own change” (pp. 114-115). Schools for young children are not a preparation for life but are life. Teachers should not try to pass on information, but rather share listening to children, care of the environment, the value of dialogue, and participation. The environment for a six-month-old-baby is different from the environment for a four-year-old child, but both environments are inspired by a high level of attention to creating a context that encourages the processes of learning and interaction in children and between children (Rinaldi, 2006).

**Characteristics for an Environment for Young Children**

Reflections on the design of school spaces have emerged over many years of experience and collaboration in research carried out in the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia. Rinaldi (1998) defined the quality of the space in terms of the quantity, quality, and development of these relationships. It is very important task for both educators and architects to make sure of the flow of this kind of quality. In *Children, Spaces, Relations*, Ceppi and Zini (1998) suggest that the following keywords and metaphors are used to identify the desirable characteristics for an environment for young children:

**Overall softness.** Spaces are softer, less rigid, and more open to diversified experience, where each person is part of a group, but also has private space from the general rhythms.
**Relation.** Environment allows the fluidization of functional zones, where many activities can be carried out. The quality of relational space depends on the quality of connections.

**Osmosis.** Environment is a hybrid space where the complexity of society becomes a formative experience in itself by providing a wealth of information and relations.

**Multisensoriality.** Space is complex and full of sensory experience, which is fundamental to the knowledge-building processes and the formation of personality.

**Epigenesis.** Environment is open to modification by the children’s processes of self-learning.

**Community.** A collective environment is based on participation and community management, on shared values and objectives.

**Constructiveness.** An environment is seen as a laboratory for individual and group learning, a place of constructivism. Constructivism is defined as the process of cognitive and cultural development.

**Narration.** Space is to generate the visibility and the transparency of the children’s processes of research and cognition.

**Rich Normality.** A space is calm, non-violent, and well balanced with different elements. The perceptual result is simple but not careless.

**The Physical Space**

Rinaldi (1998) stressed the importance of the physical space as a language. The language of space is very strong, which we can perceive and interpret from a very early age. Similar to other languages, the physical environment is a component of the
formation of thought. We involve multiple senses (seeing, smelling, listening, touching, membranes and muscles) to read and interpret this language. The central focus of school space is on the relationship between children and adults. The relationship between the children and environment are reciprocal, which means both the people and the environment are active and co-construct each other in turn.

Rinaldi (1998) commented that the infant-toddler centre and preschool should be seen as a system of systems, a system of relationships and communication among children, teachers, and parents:

The pedagogical project must be interwoven with the architectural project in such a way as to support the processes that take place in this space, the process of learning, teaching, sharing, and understanding, on the part of all the protagonists: children, staff, and parents. (p. 118)

Ceppi and Zini (1998) proposed that a valuable experience of collaboration between educators and architects in the construction of schools for young children suggests criteria with a strong identity from the pedagogical point of view as well as that of the physical organization of space:

- An environmental atmosphere creates a precise identity;
- Horizontal layout manifests a democracy of functions, equal dignity and sociality;
- A public place fosters encounters, group interaction, social relations, and the children’s assumption of a public identity;
- The school space should be able to change as a result of the experimentation of children and teachers in both short-and-long-term transformations. In Reggio Emilia preschools, each group of children keeps the same teachers throughout their school experience, but changes classrooms each year by using the room set up for their age group;
• Space is used for research, experimentation, and manipulation of a variety of materials. It is viewed as complementary to the classrooms and adult workspaces;
• The entire school is viewed as a workshop for children’s autonomous learning, equipped with materials that foster exploration;
• The school space could be used outside school hours and for various activities with people in the community, such as special events, parent advisory council meetings, and neighbourhood activities;
• Inside-outside relationship is to know what is happening outside the school—from the weather to seasonal changes, from the time of the day to the rhythms of the town;
• Transparency focuses on ensuring a sense of the depth of field and the perception of the space;
• Communication, both inside the school and with the outside, is a fundamental premise for any activity that involves research and educational project in the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia (p. 36).

**Documentation: Creating space for children.** Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) described documentation as the most important concept for the creation of reflective and democratic pedagogical practice. The concept and practice of documentation has contributed to education in many ways in representing children’s potential, assessing and evaluating children’s learning processes, and in providing the starting points of learning for students (Edward et al., 1993). Documentation has been practiced in many classrooms in North America as a form of displaying children’s products; however, in the schools of Reggio Emilia, pedagogical documentation focuses on documenting children’s
experiences, thoughts, and ideas, which uniquely contribute to early childhood education (Chard & Katz, 1997).

In Reggio Emilia, transcriptions of children’s remarks and dialogue, photographs of their activities, and children’s representations of their ideas using different media are traces of observation carefully studied. This documentation has several functions: to make it possible for teachers to understand children better; to evaluate the teacher’s own work and promote their professional growth; to make parents aware of their children’s experiences and maintain their involvement; to facilitate communication and exchange of ideas among educators and visitors; to make children aware that their effort is valued; and to create an archive that traces the history of the school and of children, teachers, and parents. According to Gandini and Golhaber (2001), the school space becomes an open documentation and exhibition where everyone who enters can notice how the education of young children is viewed. In nidi and scuole dell’infanzia, the voice and thoughts of children and their teachers are made visible. As Malaguzzi (1993) said, “The walls of our pre-primary schools speak and document. The walls are used as spaces for temporary and permanent exhibits of what the children and the adults make come to life” (p. 57).

**Space for relationship and collaboration.** The focus on collaborative communication is structurally built into the schools of Reggio Emilia by providing strong leadership that encourages teachers and families to develop capacity for dialogue and reflection among themselves. Malaguzzi (1998) provided insight in how this relationship works when he wrote:

Relationship is the primary connecting dimension of our system, however understood not merely as a warm, protective envelope, but rather as a dynamic conjunction of forces and elements interacting toward a common purpose. The strength of our system lies in the ways we make explicit and then intensify the
necessary conditions for relations and interaction. We seek to support those social exchanges that better ensure the flow of expectations, conflicts, cooperation, choices, and the explicit unfolding of programs tied to the cognitive, affective and expressive realms. (p. 68)

The teachers at the schools of Reggio Emilia believe that “the community deserves a school in which each member feels welcomed, needed, and engaged by exciting possibilities for learning and expressing ideas in a hundred different languages” (Cadwell, 1997, p. 92). Reggio teachers also believe that community members, especially parents, have the right to be informed about and involved in the children’s daily lives and their activities in schools, so it is their responsibility to create an environment and time for children, parents, and teachers to interact, collaborate, and learn together about the children’s experiences. Rinaldi (1998) suggested that the objective of the school environment is to enable children:

- To express their potential, abilities and curiosity;
- To explore and research alone and with others, both peers and adults;
- To perceive themselves as constructors of projects and of the overall educational project carried out in the school;
- To reinforce their identities (also in terms of gender), autonomy, and security;
- To work and communicate with others;
- To know that their identities and privacy are respected.

The school environment should enable the teachers:

- To feel supported and integrated in their relationships with children and parents;
• To have appropriate spaces and furnishings to satisfy their need to meet
  with other adults, both colleagues and parents;
• To have their need for privacy recognized;
• To be supported in their processes of learning and professional
development.

The school space should enable parents:
  • To be listened to and informed
  • To meet with other parents and teachers in ways and times that foster real
collaboration. (p. 120)

When we think of the classroom environment, we tend to think of what we can
see in the classroom. However, the environment is much more than visual space. A
Reggio Emilia approach argues for teacher’s attention to the innumerable ways that
environment can be made to speak and invite interaction (Cadwell, 2003). Teachers can
introduce stimuli to spark children’s discussions, which could include bringing in realistic
objects for children to use in their play, and selecting and arranging the materials
carefully to invite exploration. When teachers see the environment as central to learning,
children come to care for their surroundings, which becomes part of a planned curriculum
that is organized around Reggio Emilia philosophy of “expecting the unexpected”
(Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007).
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study's purpose was to investigate early childhood educators' understandings and beliefs about the role of the early childhood classroom environment for children’s learning. Having an interest in knowing more about the role of the environment in young children’s learning and in improving the practice of education led me to ask researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design. In this chapter, I begin with a discussion on the research design. Then, I present information about the context of the study, participants, and school contexts. Finally, I discuss the data collection procedures and analysis.

Research Design

According to Merriam (1998), research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education. Qualitative research helps us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. Most qualitative research describes and analyzes people’s individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions.

The data source includes interview notes, audiotapes, and photos of the classroom environment without any child/adult present. Qualitative researchers collect data by interacting with selected persons in their settings and by obtaining relevant documents. Qualitative research is based on a naturalistic phenomenological philosophy that views reality as multilayered, interactive, and a shared social experience interpreted by
individuals. The goal of qualitative research is concerned with understanding social phenomena from the participants’ perspective. Participants’ perspectives include their feelings, beliefs, ideals, thoughts, and actions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The objective of the study was to interview teachers who adopt the Reggio Emilia approach in their preschool or childcare classrooms about their understandings and beliefs about the role of the early childhood classroom environment in children’s learning, and how they make decisions regarding the classroom environment. Through semi-structured interviews, I explored and analyzed the teachers’ perspectives on the role of teachers and environments for young children. Since this study was exploratory in nature, concerned with identifying teachers' beliefs regarding the learning environment, and the responses were aggregated, there was no inherent risk for those involved in the project.

In my search for a more comprehensive understanding of the teachers’ beliefs regarding the learning environment for young children, I discovered what the teachers were experiencing and how they interpreted their experiences. Some questions that I asked participants were:

1. What are the teachers’ understanding of their program’s philosophy, Reggio Emilia approach, and contributions of the early childhood program?
2. How do children use or interact with the learning environment?
3. How do teachers understand the term environment for children's learning and what do they believe constitutes such an environment?
4. What do teachers identify as the challenges in creating and working in the environment for children's learning?
As a new qualitative researcher, I was concerned with making sure that I captured perspectives accurately by using a tape recorder, taking notes, and verbally checking out perspectives with the participants. I also showed the completed interview transcript to each research participant. I tried to analyze the data with all of their richness as closely as possible to the form in which the data were recorded and transcribed. The written results of the research contain quotations from the data to illustrate and substantiate the participants’ beliefs about the environment.

**Context of the Study**

The participants in this study were ten educators of young children who are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. The educators were recruited through electronic mail. They were asked to participate if their teaching philosophy was inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach and if they had experience in designing and organizing the environment in preschools and daycare programs. Background information about the educators and schools was collected in the first part of the interview. I discuss the role of participants in schools and the schools’ information in a subsequent section. The context of this study is early childhood programs in an affluent area of a western Canadian city.

**Participants**

There were 10 participants in this study from three different preschools and one daycare. All participants had experience teaching in preschool/daycare programs that were inspired by emergent curriculum. The schools and participants were identified with pseudonyms. Four participants were teaching at Village Preschool; three participants were teaching at Little Town Preschool. Two participants were from Rainbow Preschool and one from Bambini Daycare.
Table 1 Schools and Participants

Nine of the ten participants were women. Five of the ten had visited the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy. Teaching experience ranged from three to 24 years. All participants had a certificate/diploma in early childhood education; two participants had a bachelors degree in education; and two had masters’ degrees in education.

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1. There were six teachers in all at VP.
2. There were three teachers in all at LP.
3. There were two teachers in all at RP.
4. There were three teachers in all at BD.
School Contexts

The school contexts were three preschools and one childcare in a western Canadian city: Village Preschool, Little Town Preschool, Little Town Preschool, Rainbow Preschool, and Bambini Childcare.

Village Preschool. The preschool program for 3-4 year olds was offered in the morning or afternoon. Each class was a mixed-age group of threes and fours. The curriculum involved activities for all areas of development including art, music, science, mathematics, drama, physical development and early literacy. Language and social development were fostered through play-based experiences within a nurturing and supportive milieu. The teachers were strong advocates of emergent curriculum. Outdoor play occurred daily and classes took periodic field trips to nearby interest areas. Village Preschool curriculum was inspired by the thoughts, ideas, questions, and theories of the children in the class. The teachers listened carefully and documented the children’s ideas and questions. This documentation took the form of photos or direct quotes.

The Village Preschool teachers’ goals were:

• To use play as a primary avenue for learning and development;
• To represent the image of the child as unique, capable, curious and creative;
• To provide concrete experiences for future learning;
• To expand children’s understanding and comprehension of themselves and their world through relationships with peers, teachers and the environment;
• To offer many opportunities for children to collaborate, investigate, create, imagine and problem solve together.

Little Town Preschool. The teachers brought children, teachers, families and
community together in a journey of education. The teachers offered a program that challenges, encourages, and supports children in their quest for knowledge, recognizing the developmental stages of childhood and the unique gifts, talents and abilities of each child. The teachers were inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching and learning. They believed that this approach would foster the children's intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation, as children were encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through words, movement, drawing, painting, playing, and other natural modes of expression.

Teachers trusted, respected and valued the children's sense of ownership, autonomy and control of their own learning and play. Purposeful play was the core of the learning program. The teachers believed that learning occurred when children were guided to accomplish something meaningful to them. Attitudes of respect for oneself, others, and the world in which we live were recognized and fostered. Parents’ involvement was encouraged in many different ways.

Little Town Preschool teachers’ goals were:

- To create an atmosphere of trust, security, and comfort in which the child can feel motivated, esteemed, and appreciated;
- To provide an enriched and stimulating environment that meets the needs of the whole child, including the cognitive, creative, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual self;
- To provide opportunities for self-expression, investigation, and experimentation;
- To cultivate attitudes, habits, and appreciation that will enable the child to explore, question, and discover the world, its peoples, and their cultures;
• To encourage problem solving skills and responsible decisions through respectful guidance;
• To provide an appropriate balance between active and passive activities, as well as between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities;
• To promote the uniqueness and individual worth of each child by focusing on competence and capabilities.

**Rainbow Preschool.** Rainbow Preschool was a two and a half hour program for 3-4-year-olds that operated Monday to Thursday. This program was a play-based program that allowed children to develop at their own pace. The curriculum explored themes of interest for the children, with the purpose of focusing on their curiosity and promoting discussion. Each class was a mixed age group of threes and fours together. Class size did not exceed 20 children. Language and social development were nurtured through play-based experiences.

The curriculum included activities and programs in all areas of development: social, emotional, physical, creative, and intellectual. Art, music, science, drama, physical development, early literacy, and numbers were all included. Outdoor play occurred daily and classes took periodic field trips to nearby interest areas. The curriculum also provided enriching opportunities for the children to participate in art and music workshops. An early childhood music specialist gave a series of music workshops focusing on rhythm and movement. Unlike the other programs in this study, the participants did not have explicit goals for their program.

**Bambini Daycare.** Bambini’s program was play based, focusing on age-appropriate experiences and activities that reflected the children’s interests and developmental levels.
Teachers recognized that no two children develop on the same schedule or in the same sequence and strived to provide opportunities for each child, as they were ready for them. Bambini daycare teachers’ goals were:

- To set up the environment carefully in order to eliminate many potential problems;
- To guide children into an acceptable activity when they were engaged in an unacceptable activity;
- To help children become aware of the results of their actions;
- To establish boundaries for particular situations;
- To show children positive methods of interacting;
- To provide children with appropriate choices and to encourage them to choose for themselves;
- To use positive reinforcement and encouragement and to ignore negative behavior;
- To encourage children to resolve conflict and cooperate with others through discussion and compromise.

Data Collection

In this study, the data collection method was a semi-structured interview which required interaction with research participants directly in order to understand their beliefs about the meaning and significance of the environment for young children’s learning. The more common practice for semi-structured interview studies is to study small homogeneous samples in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of particular experiences or understandings.
Instruments and Procedure

I made initial visits to the childcare/preschool programs that were inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to meet with the coordinator and the teachers who had shown an interest in participating in this study. I also provided the purpose and procedure of the research to the coordinators and teachers. Then, I explained the study and its goal to potential participants and gave them at least two weeks to consider their participation.

Through email, I made an appointment with each educator. Each interview lasted on average 40 minutes, but they varied from 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were held in the educator’s schools. I met with teachers prior to the interview so that the teachers could provide the researcher with information about regular classroom routines and environment. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured based on the interview questions (Appendix C). I followed an agenda of questions; however, I also followed up on any interesting leads that flowed out of the interviewees’ responses to questions.

Data Analysis

According to Walcott (2001), the goal of analysis is to create a concise collection of data by coding, counting, tallying, and summarizing the raw data. Data analysis reduces data to a more manageable form that permits researchers to tell a story about the people or group that is the focus of their research. Analysis turns raw data into “cooked data” or results. Generally, data analysis has to be done on at least two levels. The first level is what makes the story meaningful to the participants or the people who have been studied. The second level involves making results meaningful to the audiences.
Validity of Research Design

According to LeCompte (1987), qualitative researchers are concerned with the effect that their own subjectivity may have on the data and papers they produce. I have wrestled with the issue that my personal beliefs and attitudes might bias the data since I started this study. It was a relief to know that the data that were collected provided a much more detailed rendering of events than even my mind might have imagined prior to the study. Additionally, my goal was to add to knowledge, not to pass any judgment on a setting. I became more reflective and conscious of how my values may shape and enrich this study. In order to recognize my own biases, I had my transcripts and personal reflections critiqued by the participants.

Validity of qualitative design refers to the degree to which the interpretations and concepts have mutual meanings between the participants and the researchers. In qualitative research, claims of validity rest on the data collection and analysis techniques. The essential strategies are prolonged fieldwork, verbatim accounts, low-inference descriptions, and negative case search (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

• I presented in my study extensive direct quotations from the data to illustrate participants’ meanings because verbatim accounts of conversations and transcripts were highly valued as data.
• I used a digital voice recorder and a digital camera to collect data. I hoped to enhance validity by providing an accurate and relatively complete record.
• After I finished transcribing all interviews, I sent verbatim transcripts to each participant through electronic mail. I asked each participant to review his or her transcript of the data obtained from him or her.
• A negative case is a participant’s view that contradicts the emerging pattern of meanings. Discrepant data presents a variation of the emerging pattern. I looked for both negative cases and discrepant data in order to validate the findings.

• During my process of analyzing data, I was taking a course, EDUC 504: Seminar in Qualitative Data Analysis. My classmates and instructor posed searching questions to help me understand my values and my role in the inquiry. In addition, the discussions made more explicit the tacit knowledge that I had acquired throughout the study.

• I maintained a record of data management techniques and decision rules that link the findings to my original sources or data. The study’s record includes the data management techniques and the codes, categories, and themes used to build and interpret the narrative case, preliminary coding lists, and integrative diagrams. Thus, the chain of evidence is available for inspection and confirmation by outside reviewers.

**The Constant-Comparative Method**

There are several techniques for discovering themes in texts. The constant comparative approach is based on the idea that themes represent the ways in which texts are either similar to or different from each other. This method of data analysis is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the means of developing grounded theory. This theoretical perspective proposed the use of methods such as in-depth interviewing and participant observation that allow subjects to represent their experiences in their own voices. This
methodological shift provides a powerful tool for the exploration and identification of new issues and concepts, and the development of new theories.

Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. I used a constant-comparative method to determine themes across responses. I began with a particular incident from an interview and compared it with another incident in the same set of data or another set. I linked data together in a narrative that conveys the meaning that I derived from studying the phenomenon. I constructed categories and subcategories through the constant comparative method of data analysis. In the next chapter, I discuss the results of the analyses.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Constructions of Early Childhood Education

Children’s lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children are and should be. (Mayall, 1996, p.1)

[T]o abandon the ‘grand narrative’ of a theoretical unity of knowledge, and to be content with more local and practical aims.

This means abandoning one of the deepest assumptions (and hopes) of Enlightenment thought: that what is ‘really’ available for perception ‘out there’ is an orderly and systematic world, (potentially) the same for all of us—such that, if we really persist in our investigations and arguments, we will ultimately secure universal agreement about its nature. (Shotter, 1992, p.69)

Research regarding educators’ interpretations of theory and philosophy has not been as frequently conducted as the examination of the relationship between teacher’s beliefs and their practice (Edwards, 2005). The findings reported in this study address these concerns by examining the perceptions of ten practicing early childhood educators on the learning environment inspired by Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Early childhood education represents a complicated array of beliefs, values, and knowledge about child development, learning and the purpose of education itself. During the past 20 years the discussion associated with early childhood education has tended to centre on the work expressed in Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and in the
emerging pedagogical work in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Both DAP and the Reggio Emilia approach present themselves as possible methods associated with the task of educating young children within a given context. In both the Reggio Emilia and DAP literatures reference is often made to concepts initially established by Piaget’s genetic epistemology that deal with the construction of knowledge. However, the DAP guidelines tend to emphasize Piaget’s developmental stage-based theory, more so than the Reggio Emilia approach, which emphasizes possibilities associated with children’s perceived potential in relation to the social contexts that, are argued, inform learning (Edwards, 2005).

Early childhood professionals attempting to implement a Reggio Emilia approach in their classrooms must contend with the competing professional paradigms of early childhood education. In this study, I describe the beliefs and understandings of ten early childhood educators to give some perspectives of how these tensions play out in preschool and daycare settings. Though the understandings of the teachers studied here embody some aspects of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, they are also marked by problems with personal interpretation, partial adoption, and inconsistency in implementation of Reggio Emilia principles. Analysis of these participants’ understandings provides insight into the general challenge of interpreting the Reggio Emilia philosophy as well as into the specific challenges facing early childhood educators committed to providing a learning environment for young children. This study examined the educators’ understanding of early childhood and its institutions through their conceptions of the learning environment. The findings are presented in three parts: the participants’ reflections on the educational spaces that resonate with a Reggio Emilia
approach; their perspective on relationships within the spaces; and the dominance of developmentally appropriate practice in the early childhood field.

**Reflections on the Educational Spaces**

A visitor to any early childhood program tends to notice the messages that the space gives about the quality of care and educational choices that form the foundation of the program. We tend to make meaning on the basis of personal experience and the knowledge we have acquired about child development, all of which has shaped our ideas about childhood. If we observe the extent to which everyone involved is at ease with and uses the space itself, we then can learn more about the value and meaning of the relationships among the children and adults who spend time there (Gandini, 1993).

Space or environment refers to the physical features of the place in which one lives and works with children and the inherent values about children and education these features reveal. The educators in the daycare and preschools that are inspired by Reggio Emilia focus explicitly on school environments, where a child’s social and intellectual development are enriched. Teachers believe that the space for children’s learning is rich and complex, and that it supports relationships between people and ideas. Aesthetics is an important part of the learning environment as it shows respect to the people using the space-- children and adults. The educators carefully consider the physical environment in light of its educational philosophy, both in terms of the objects in the environment and in terms of the kinds of spaces for learning experiences.

**Space that Reflects the Educational Approach**

The educators who participated in the study are well aware of the importance of the environment. Some because of funding limitations have been forced to make
compromises with regard to indoor space, for example, making do with limited space or sharing space with other programs. Nonetheless, all participants invest a great deal of their energy in thinking about and planning their space. They have found many ways to make the space more than just a useful and safe place in which to spend active hours. Rather, they have created spaces in their centres that reflect their culture and beliefs. The participants’ spaces are generally pleasant and welcoming, telling a great deal about the projects and activities, the daily routines, and the people within the space. These educators believe that children are capable and independent in making their own decisions. Through valuing children for who they are and allowing children to express themselves, they help children become aware of their own identity.

_We believe that each child is unique, capable, curious and creative, sort of the same principle as the image of the child in Reggio Emilia. We also view the child as strong and capable, not weak and inferior. I think the image of the child is very important because if you go to the classroom you will see the documentation. I think our documentation on the wall represents our view of children as strong and capable. And we really value their ideas, contributions, and work._ (Anna, VP)

**Space that Documents Children’s Experiences**

One of the aspects of space that participants frequently mentioned is the importance of children’s own work being prominently exhibited. However, the way some participants engage in documentation is different from that of Reggio Emilia due to the schools’ context. It seems to be more practical and beneficial to develop their own ways of documentation according to their situation; for example, parents are encouraged to document children’s experiences in the preschool program. Even though they do not have
the support of an atelierista (studio teacher), the participants select and prepare the displays with great care. Often these displays include photographs that show the learning process, and a description of the sequential steps taken by the child/children engaged in an activity. The children’s learning process is made visible and available not only through displays of panels but also through many other important means, including small exhibits of children’s artifacts and audiocassettes of children’s discussions. Most of the participants mentioned that documentation makes children feel valued, generates interest, and leaves evidence of children’s abilities.

> Sometimes, children know that we are listening to their words and ask, "Did you get what I have said?" We value children and their work by making their words and their pictures visible. (Danika, VP)

> There are three teachers in the class. One of them documents children’s conversations and takes photos. It is a wonderful thing because it makes you, the teacher, listen more carefully. When you take it home and you say, "Ah ha! This is what we need to do tomorrow." You find the gaps in the children's thinking and you can determine the children's understanding of the topic. So for us, documentation is a fantastic tool. But it is very hard work and time-consuming. (Caitlin, VP)

**Space that Welcomes Children, Families, and Community**

By recognizing aesthetic qualities as connected to and part of daily life, these qualities have the potential to help facilitate learning experiences by making children feel valuable and at ease. In all participants’ schools, there is a great deal of attention paid to the beauty, tidiness, and harmony of design. It is also evident in the decoration of the
light table, the easels, the large windows, the healthy plants, and many other details such as the careful upkeep of the space. The participants want to organize the space, and create an atmosphere of discovery and serenity that makes children and adults feel welcome and wanting to explore and engage in activities. These impressions come from the way the environment is thoughtfully organized, and from observing how children move about in the classroom.

*I think when we set up an environment that is beautiful, so the children will feel respected and celebrated. I hope that when people walk into the classroom they will think, "Wow, this school really cares about their spaces and what it looks like." I think it goes back to showing respect and celebration of children being very capable and deserving of beautiful things.* (Janice, LP)

*The children's artworks are put on the wall, framed properly and nicely displayed. We have their words and their thoughts with it. Sometimes children knew that we were listening to their words and asked, "Did you get what I had said?"* (Danika, VP)

**Space that Reflects the Culture**

Several participants believed that the learning environment should reflect the culture of people who live in the space. Several focused on the importance of bringing in natural materials which represent the locality of the school and community around the school, where children’s cultures are rooted. The educators displayed mushrooms, pinecones, stones, and shells that the children had gathered on special outings or regular walks. These displays record the events in the children’s lives. Furthermore, they encourage children to bring in an important part of their experiences at home to present to
their friends and teachers. Even though the participants mentioned that their programs are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, their programs are very different from the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

_Different people have different tastes, so the aesthetic aspect varies from person to person. In terms of our team, we have a common interest in nature. The beauty that surrounds us in Vancouver stimulates artistic roles whether in music, painting or sculpture. A lot of natural materials are things that we find in British Columbia, such as pinecones, wood, and rocks by the riverbed, as well as the photos we took when we went for a walk._ (Gianna, BD)

_What we learned from Reggio Emilia is that your program should be rooted in the very culture of where you live because that is the relevant culture of the children. So we need to be rooted right here in the rain forest. We are not on the Italian piazza. I think the Reggio Emilia approach impressed us in that way. We can't copy Reggio Emilia, but we can apply their philosophy._ (Caitlin, VP)

**Space that Favours Relationships and Interactions**

Several participants mentioned the role and importance of relationships in children’s learning. They agreed that the relationships between children offer opportunities to lend and borrow ideas. In this context, children experience the pleasure of being given back pieces of their own knowledge, enriched and elaborated on by the contribution of others through this system of communication and exchange. Social exchange is seen as essential in learning. The space is planned and set up to facilitate encounters, interactions, and exchanges among children. The participants encourage
children to work in small groups by arranging the area with enough space, tables, and more than one chair for children to use for work with peers or adults. At the same time, the space is set up to foster real collaboration between parents and educators. The participants mentioned that early childhood educators would gain their support and confidence from discussing and articulating their practice in an open way with their co-workers and other early childhood educators in the local area.

*We try to socially get the children to work together. The children can learn so much from their peers, or someone older. They can learn easier from their peers than their teachers. They learn side by side, "Let's figure this out together." This process strengthens the children’s learning by having to teach their friends so that it gives them great confidence.* (Danika, VP)

*Our intent is to provoke their engagement. The environment must have things that provide opportunities for questions and dialogue. You see lots of places for conversation, conversation about “What do you think is happening here?” So the materials should be put out to provoke, not only participation, but also conversation.* (Caitlin, VP)

**Space that Involves Parents’ Participation**

In order to understand each individual child better, several participants mentioned that communicating and working with the parents is critical for children’s learning because parents know their children better than others. Most participants use the documentation of the children’s lives and learning experiences at school as one of many ways to communicate with the parents and visitors. Several participants believe that the environment should support a sense of community among young children and their
families so they feel that they are an important part of this learning community, through
the use of events such as fieldtrips, family events, celebrations, and parental participation.

*We are very conscious of parents' wanting to know what happens in the school.*

*We try to create an environment that they have a window on what is happening. I
don't mean window in the literal sense. This is why some of the documentation we
do is definitely for the parents’ benefit. We do listen to parents and we welcome their comments.* (Caitlin, VP)

**Space that Recognizes the Hundred Languages of Children**

All participants recognize and celebrate the many ways young children represent their ideas. The participants described their environment as “the third teacher” because the environment is seen as educating the child. In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible. It must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain responsive to their needs. Most participants mentioned that the materials or objects are not seen as passive elements. On the contrary, they are seen as elements that provoke and invite children’s participation in the learning process. The children can use what they call artistic representations including words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, collage, dramatic play, and music to record their ideas, observations, memories, and so forth to co-construct understandings of the topic investigated.

*Another part of Reggio Emilia is the hundred languages of children. It is how the children can do one thing in a hundred different ways. We don't teach something in a typical way. If we want children to do letter A, some kids will make it out of their bodies, some kids will make it out of clay, some kids will make it out of wire.*
We try to use all the languages. In our art room, we have paint, clay, wire, strings, sand, scissors and felt. It is amazing to see how each person thinks differently. (Hallie, LP)

To look at each child individually is to think about how we can give each child a voice, not in a literal sense, but a place to be themselves and the opportunity to express themselves. We try to give children lots of experience in using different materials to express themselves --through painting, drawing, building, singing or dancing. It is important for children to express their ideas in their own ways, not the cookie-cutter-way that everybody else is doing. (Caitlin, VP)

Space that Follows Children’s Interests and Needs

Careful attention is given to the organization of the spaces that can best respond to the needs for security and desire for autonomy expressed by preschool children. Two participants mentioned that the environment must be respectful of the differences among the individual children in terms of gender identity because boys and girls have profoundly different ways of approaching the environment. Most participants reported that they responded to the children’s interests, documenting their learning processes and extending their interests by providing different tools. Several participants wanted to focus more on the children’s learning processes than the outcomes by making learning experiences enjoyable for children.

We are inspired by the emerging curriculum. A project could take weeks or months depending on the children’s interest. If they have a lot of questions or misconceptions, we can focus on their problems and help them to understand. If there is an interest, we can keep going. (Danika, VP)
Reflections on Relationships in the Educational Spaces

Throughout the interview, all participants recognized the importance of an education based on relationships. The Reggio Emilia approach focuses on each child, not considered in isolation, but seen in relation with the family, with other children, and with the teachers. The relationships are diverse and complex, not only between children themselves and between children and adults, but also between adults. A feature of these four settings is that they offer possibilities for members of the staff to work together as a group, providing mutual support and engaging with each other in the process of documentation, environmental set up, and more general dialogue.

Relationships Among Children

In preparing the space, the educators offer the possibility for children to be with the teachers and many of the other children, or with just a few of them, or even alone when they need a little niche to stay in by themselves. The educators are aware, however, that children learn a great deal in exchanges with their peers in small groups. Such small groups of two, three, four, or five children provide possibilities for paying attention, for hearing and listening to each other, for developing curiosity and interest, for asking questions, and for responding to them. Malaguzzi (1993) suggested that it is desirable that adults initiate the setting of such situations because this type of small group favours the emergence of cognitive conflicts; such conflicts can initiate a process in which, while children find a resolution, they construct new learning together. The participants mentioned that the learning environment should provide opportunities for children to exchange ideas and develop theories. This definition aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978)
social constructivism; that is, children learn in a social context. Children are working collaboratively in learning and developing theories together.

*Last week, a couple of girls made green paint and they were talking about the shades. One girl said, "Mine is green" and the other girl said, "Mine is also green" and the teacher said, "They are not the same". The girl thought about it and she said, "I have put lots of yellow and a little bit of blue and she put lots of blue and a little bit of yellow.* (Bernice, VP)

**Teacher-Child Relationships**

In Reggio Emilia schools, the role of teachers is considered to be one of continual research and learning, with the focus on children and embedded in team cooperation. Children and teachers work collaboratively in learning and developing theories together. To know how to plan or proceed with their work, the teachers observe and listen to the children closely. They ask questions and discover the children’s ideas, hypotheses, and theories; they see learning not as a linear process but as a spiral progression. The teachers consider themselves to be partners in this process of learning. The participants believe that the role of the teacher is to produce a context in which children feel trusted, comfortable, motivated and respected in their learning relationship.

*The children and teachers are constantly questioning, making provocations, and developing theories together. So it is more like a collaborative curriculum. I just love it because we never know what is going to happen next. Sometimes you have an idea in your head about what you want to do, but then the children offer their idea and it turns out to be better.* (Anna, VP)
My role is to observe children responding to the environment and to create opportunities to expand their interests into deeper exploration. We observe, reflect and act upon the observations and information collected. (Gianna, BD)

Relationships Among Teachers

According to Rinaldi (1992), collaboration among teachers requires a commitment to listening in a way that is open and sensitive to the need to listen and be listened to. Eight participants mentioned the importance of teamwork and collaboration between their teaching teams. The teachers always discussed things that happen in their classes, listened to one another, and made decisions as a group.

Different children in each class and different teachers mean that we have to have a lot of discussions and we have to work as a team. As I say it doesn’t always sound easy and it is not necessarily the most efficient way to do things, but we hope that everybody gets to have a say in what happens and that we will listen to each other. (Caitlin, VP)

The participants also mentioned that through exchanging experiences and ideas with their co-teachers, they could build satisfactory relationships and feel valued both personally and professionally.

It is a good flow that she will have a thousand ideas that I wouldn't have thought of. Now, we have a practicum student as well, so we are getting even more ideas. I have a different philosophy from the other teacher. We try to mold our philosophies together. (Farrell, RP)
Relationships Between School and Community

To develop respectful relationships, the participants are committed to recognizing and building on the strengths of the diverse cultures and styles of both the educators and families at the centres. By becoming more sensitive and responsive to cultural values and family preferences, the participants help to ease children’s daily transitions and bring family and culture into the classroom. The participants mentioned that it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the different cultures in children’s lives through recognizing each culture or organizing small events in collaboration with parents.

*We have Chinese children, so we celebrate Chinese New Year. We invited the parents to come in and help us do a stir-fry, or some authentic Chinese foods. We definitely try to collaborate with the parents because it becomes more meaningful.* (Anna, VP)

*We have Jewish children and teacher, so we celebrate Hanukkah, which is during our Christmas time.* (Anna, VP)

*Sometimes we put up stereotypical things, such as Native American head feather, but that is very sacred especially for the natives. We have to give respect to the culture. We need to be aware when we do this kind of stuff.* (Farrell, RP)

Five participants mentioned creating an environment that supported a sense of community in young children and their families, so the children would feel that they are part of this learning community.

*For children, I think it is important for them to feel a sense of community. School for children is to have a close relationship with their teachers, their parents and to feel a sense of community.* (Anna, VP)
Three participants mentioned taking children on field trips to enjoy the new experience and meeting with people in their community.

*Field trips are certainly one way to get the support of the community. People usually talk to the children at the appropriate level. One of our fieldtrips is to go to the Vancouver Art Gallery. It is absolutely wonderful. They have people trained to work with preschool age children. We take children on neighborhood walks when the weather is nice. People are friendly and they enjoy seeing the children.*

(Bernice, VP)

Four participants mentioned that they wanted to visit other schools to exchange ideas and meet with other early childhood educators, which can be viewed as another way to build a learning community and learn from others in the early childhood professions.

*It is very good for people to go to conferences and workshops. It is good to go elsewhere, but it is also important to meet with early childhood educators in your local area.* (Caitlin, VP)

*It is important to have a team of colleagues outside of your school. To have a community that you can talk to, or email or visit, or have an open house, just like a workshop or practicum student. When you finish your research, we will learn from that too. Like the children, we can learn from each other. There is one little quote that says, “When one teaches, two learn.” When we try to teach someone, we can learn from it as well.* (Irene, LP)

Because education is the business of the entire community, three participants mentioned that the involvement of concerned citizens is necessary. In order to make any
change or improve their program, educators need to gain support from the people who are involved in early childhood programs and people in the community.

*We need to be supported by the board. Many years ago, this preschool was a Christian preschool so it was a religious program. Our previous director reinvented the wheels. She started adopting the Reggio philosophy, so we need a supportive board to let us make some changes. We need to have the board that trust us and allow us to make changes.* (Janice, LP)

**Relationships Between Teachers and Parents**

As Rinaldi (2001) states in *Making Learning Visible*, Reggio Emilia educators place emphasis on documentation as an integral part of the procedures aimed at fostering learning and for modifying the learning-teaching relationships. The participants mentioned that documentation is valued not only for its use in recalling and evaluating experience, but also for its power to support new learning. It enables parents, teachers, and children to reflect and search for meaning together. Three participants mentioned that most parents want to know what happens in their children’s lives during their time at school. The documentation of children’s lives and learning experiences at school could be one of many ways to start a conversation between parents and teachers or parents and their children.

Family involvement has ranged from volunteering in classrooms to building a new playground. As the participants learned more about the relationships of families and the early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia, they began to consider what it might mean to strengthen the existing systems of parent involvement in the preschool as well as to invent new systems with the parents. The participants mentioned that the parents are
very helpful and show their support by volunteering, sharing ideas and bringing materials for the early childhood programs.

_We have parent representatives who come to our board meeting every month. The parents that have concerns but want to keep matters confidential can go to the parent representatives. We are lucky that the parents want to support our program in many ways. For example, when we had our Christmas dinner, the parents organized everything for us. We also have the parents that run our book club. Our registrar and treasurer are parents._ (Janice, LP)

In Reggio Emilia, educational supports for group belonging are provided by documentation, project work, and group decision-making. These group activities create a sense of community and bridge children to the wider world around the school. The project narrative, _Theater Curtain: The Ring of Transformations_ (Reggio Children, 2002), represents how children from the Diana Preschool in Italy designed and created a magnificent new house curtain for the Arioto Theater. Through the children’s project, we understand that the role of relationships between children, teachers, parents, and community are important in creating a strong sense of solidarity.

**The Dominance of Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

The early childhood field has historically been grounded in a child development knowledge base. Although the scope and emphasis of this knowledge base has changed over the years, and although early childhood professionals recognize that other sources of knowledge are also important influences on curriculum and programs for young children, early childhood practice continues to be deeply linked with a “sympathetic understanding of the young child” (NAEYC, 1997). Many have noted the affinity between Reggio
Emilia approach and that which has characterized past and present interpretations of high-quality early childhood programs in North America (Bredekamp, 1993; New, 1990). Close inspection of Reggio Emilia approach provides challenges to North American assumptions of what is normative, feasible, desirable, and appropriate (New, 1993). There are five principles from DAP that underlie the participants’ construction of childhood and early childhood institution.

**Promoting Child Development and Learning**

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) emphasizes the multiple influences on development and learning. These influences include the cultural and linguistic contexts for development, close relationships with adults and peers, economic conditions of children and families, health status and disabilities, individual developmental variations and learning styles, opportunities to play and learn, technology and the media, and family and community characteristics. Two participants mentioned that they tried to guide children when they are exploring something. The role of educators was seen as moderator or negotiator.

*Our role as a teacher is to guide them through what they are seeing. Whether it is an activity or project we are working on, we allow them to try it their way, but we also show them in a gentle way, kind of guiding them to a better understanding of what they are seeing. Our goal is more like a moderator.* (Erica, RP)

The educators’ knowledge and understanding of young children’s characteristics and needs encompasses multiple, interrelated areas of children’s development and learning—including physical, cognitive, social, emotional, language, and aesthetic domains, play, activity, and learning processes and motivation to learn.
I think our children have quite a broad range of activities and experiences, especially in the area of the arts. We have all sorts of activities, such as clay, three-dimensional things, and many kinds of paint. We also bring in lots of items from the natural world to investigate. We do baking, which relates to math. We do lots of singing, but we might need to do more in terms of music and movement.

There is always something to improve. We do pretty well in terms of literature, stories, books, emerging literacy. We could do more in science and those kinds of things. I am being very critical but there is always room for improvement and it is important to reflect on your teaching. (Caitlin, VP)

Building Family and Community Relationships

Early childhood educators know about, understand, and value the importance and complex characteristics of children’s families and communities. They use this understanding to create respectful relationships that support and empower families, and to involve all families in their children’s development and learning.

We have different events where families come together. We have a picnic at the beach every year. We have a big family dinner, party and performances every year. Also on a daily basis, wherever we need help building or fixing something, we know that parents are really great at something or have skills, we will invite them in. There is always a way for the parents to be involved. There are usually not enough jobs. This is what’s very special about this community that parents want to be involved. (Janice, LP)

One of the projects that we worked on all year long is a journal. We took pictures, starting from the first day of school until we finished the project. On Tuesday, we
had a setup: glue, binder, paper, pictures, and markers. The parents put the pictures on the binder and then the kids helped. The parents were asking some questions to their children that we gave them some ideas. The parents documented what the child had said about the pictures. What happens was the parents saw their children’s progress. Children got to show their parents what they were doing at school. (Erica, RP)

The participants understand how to build positive relationships, taking families’ preferences and goals into account, and incorporating knowledge of families’ languages and cultures. In a multicultural society, one participant mentioned that it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the different cultures in children’s lives through organizing small events in collaboration with parents.

The educators consider family members to be resources for insight into their children as well as for curriculum and program development. They know about and demonstrate a variety of communication skills to foster these relationships, emphasizing informal conversations while also including such approaches as e-mail discussions and posting information and children’s work on the Web with print copies sent home for families without Web access.

*When we work on themes or projects, we will send the parents email. For example, this month we are working on a science project. Is there anybody who has some ideas and thoughts about it? Please bring it in and I will invite someone who is a scientist and works on campus, so we can go to a real science lab.*

(Erica, RP)
In their work, early childhood educators support and empower diverse families, including those whose children have special characteristics, learning needs, and disabilities; families who are facing multiple challenges in their lives; and families whose languages and cultures may differ from those of the early childhood professional. The participants also understand that their relationships with families include assisting families in finding needed resources, such as English language instruction, and economic assistance, that may contribute directly or indirectly to their children’s positive development and learning.

_I engage lots of help from other parents to interpret when I encountered children or parents who can’t speak English. The English-speaking parents usually are pretty on board quickly. They do let them know how things are working._ (Erica, RP)

They understand and value the role of parents and other important family members as children’s primary teachers. Three educators mentioned the importance of home visits, which can build trusting relationships with children and parents before they come to school.

_I think we need the support from the parents. Just working with the parents on what works for their children. Parents know their children best._ (Danika, VP)

_What we do in the beginning of the year, and I know some other schools also do this, is home visits. And we visit each kid individually. So that really starts up a relationship between children and teachers very well. When they come to school, the child said, "I know her. She has been to my house." That makes it really good for the kids._ (Anna, VP)
Observing, Documenting, and Assessing to Support Young Children and Families

According to DAP, the term “assessment” includes all methods through which early childhood professionals gain understanding of children’s development and learning. Observation, documentation, and other forms of assessment are central to the practice of all early childhood educators. Ongoing, systematic observations and other informal and formal assessments enable the educators to appreciate children’s unique qualities, to develop appropriate goals, and to plan, implement, and evaluate effective curriculum. Although assessment may take many forms, the participants demonstrated its central role by embedding assessment-related activities in curriculum and in daily routines, so that assessment becomes a habitual part of professional life.

*My role here with my staff is to observe children responding to the environment and we create other opportunities that expand the children's interests and other ideas into deeper exploration. We observe, reflect and act upon the observations and information collected.* (Gianna, BD)

Because play is such a powerful window on all aspects of children’s development, educators create opportunities to observe children in playful situations as well as in more formal learning contexts. The educators should, therefore, demonstrate skills in conducting systematic observations, interpreting these observations, and reflecting on their significance.

*We want to be flexible as to how they use materials and how they interact with the adjacent areas. Through observation, we want to find other ways of presenting materials. We want our environment to be as flexible as possible. For example, our shelves have wheels, so when the whole group starts dancing, we will move*
these shelves so the whole middle area can become a dance floor. It provides greater flexibility in the environment for the children to develop their own curriculum and play. We are here to support and provide the materials and encouragement to the children to help them go deeper into what they are exploring. (Gianna, BD)

It is our job to keep the plays interesting and keep the play going. We want to draw out information from the children about what they are doing and how they are doing. We keep questioning and observing how they are playing and what we can do next. (Farrell, RP)

**Teaching and Learning**

In DAP classrooms, early childhood educators integrate their understanding of relationships with children and families; their understanding of developmentally effective approaches to teaching and learning; and their knowledge of academic disciplines, to design, implement, and evaluate experiences that promote positive development and learning for all young children. According to DAP, this standard is complex because teaching and learning with young children is a complex enterprise, and its details vary depending on children’s ages, characteristics, and the settings within which teaching and learning occur.

In DAP classrooms, children’s learning is dependent not just on “instruction,” but on personal connections with important adults who support and facilitate children’s learning. It is through these connections that children develop not only academic skills but also positive learning dispositions and confidence in themselves as learners. The educators display warm, nurturing interactions with individual children and their families,
communicating genuine liking for and interest in young children’s activities and characteristics.

The first thing that came to my mind is self-esteem. We want to develop self-esteem in the children. If the children feel good about themselves, they can learn much more easily. It helps their social interactions because they have confidence. We have some children who are very shy, so we work on that. When they feel more confident about themselves, they will explore things further. (Bernice, VP)

I would say that making sure of safety and setting the environment as the third teacher, so the children are capable of doing things by themselves. If they need to open their snacks, the scissors are on the table, so they don’t need to ask you. We sit on our hands a lot and we get the children to do things for each other a lot, to make them feel more competent and capable. (Hallie, LP)

Teaching and learning are based on an understanding of children as individuals and as part of a group, and on alignment with important educational and developmental goals. Educators embed every aspect of the program within the context of rich oral language and other communication strategies. Both verbal and nonverbal communications create not only supportive relationships but also the foundations for literacy and cognitive development and later academic competence.

A huge part of our philosophy is recognizing that each child is so individual, so different from the next child, so the way that one child learns or discovers something is going to be very different from another child. We are celebrating individual strength, interest and capability. If you have a very active and difficult group of children, you would probably set it up differently than you would with
calm and quiet children. We put development level and personality into consideration. (Janice, LP)

Especially for the youngest children, the curriculum is the physical and social environment and in particular the daily routines of feeding, bathing, napping, and playtime. Educators understand that the environment can foster security and support exploration, and they create physical environments and routines that offer predictability as well as opportunities for oral language development, social interaction, and investigations.

The children play outside for about 20 minutes, then they will come inside and we do a little meeting at the carpet where we will sing some songs. We do a lot of name songs to get to know everybody in class and to recognize each child. We also have a little discussion on whatever topics and then we have free play.

(Anna, VP)

The participants demonstrate understanding and skill in setting up all aspects of the indoor and outdoor environment to promote learning and development. The educators’ work can display their skills in designing these centers and other features of the environment to support specific goals and to expand children’s learning.

I will try my best to understand the classroom layout and how the children are playing. If I bring in a hammer, but the children cannot use it because it is disturbing the book area, they will only learn that teachers are not happy about hammers. So we need to put the hammer in a place that everybody is happy about. The teachers need to be able to set up good layout of the classroom and clever positioning of activity. (Erica, RP)
DAP focuses on children’s individual characteristics, cultures, temperaments, and central developmental concerns, using families as important sources of insight. In implementing effective approaches to teaching and learning, the educators demonstrate that they use linguistic and cultural diversity as resources, rather than seeing diversity as a deficit or problem.

Because so much of children’s learning takes place in a social context, early childhood educators view the peer group as a teaching tool. When working with groups of children, educators show competence in promoting positive social interactions and—depending on children’s ages and social skills—engaging children in parallel or collaborative learning activities.

*Right now, we are learning about shapes. Children will gather around and look for the shapes. When they find it, they start to say, "The triangle is over here." "Here, I can help you find the octagon." They are learning to work together to find different shapes. "I can't find the square, did you find it?" We try to socially get them to work together.* (Danika, VP)

The educators understand that children who have limited social skills or who are rejected by others may have difficulty in other areas, and so they actively work to increase social competence in all children, treating this as an educational priority.

*Our view is that all children are so capable, so we try to get them to show their capabilities. If a boy has trouble opening the snack, he will ask his friend for help.* (Hallie, LP)

According to the principles of DAP, all early childhood educators must demonstrate competence in using play as a foundation for young children’s learning from
infancy through the primary grades. Although most children play spontaneously, the educators can create environments that enrich and extend children’s play, knowing when to intervene with questions, suggestions, and challenges.

*We believe that the children learn through hands-on activities. It is through their play that they make sense of the world and what is going on. My role is to observe children responding to the environment and create other opportunities to expand their interests and other ideas into deeper exploration.* (Gianna, BD)

The educators create and support play experiences that reflect gender equity, respect for cultural diversity, and principles of nonviolence. They demonstrate understanding of the value of play in itself, as a way for children to make sense of their experiences, and as a way to develop a wide range of skills.

*It depends on the child’s gender. The boys gravitate around the trucks. In order to get the girls there, sometimes we will invite the boys to come and do a different activity that is in another area of the classroom because the girls can get intimidated by the rough play of the boys.* (Bernice, VP)

*The boys and the girls don’t play in certain areas because of the gender issue. It is important for the girls to do dress up, while the boys play with cars and sand. We see some cross over, but not a lot. I can see the different materials for different kids.* (Farrell, RP)

Skills in developing integrated, thematic, or emergent curriculum are also evident in the work of the participants. Depending on children’s ages and developmental levels, an integrated “project approach” to teaching and learning frequently allows children to immerse themselves for extended periods in the study of a topic of high interest to an
entire class or a small group. The educators embed valuable content from mathematics, the arts, literacy, social studies and other areas in these kinds of thematic studies.

*In our two and three-year-old class, we give children a lot of time to build their skills with materials. By the time the children move to four-year-old class, all these skills that they have been building are woven into the project. (Janice, LP)*

*We use provocations a lot to provoke children’s ideas. We work with train of thought. We are very flexible, when it comes to where the kids are. We also do themes too, so we are working on Halloween and in the month of November, we will do science. (Erica, RP)*

**DAP Professional Standards**

The profession’s code of ethical conduct guides the practice of most early childhood educators in North America. The educators are very familiar with the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and are guided by its principles. An attitude of inquiry is evident in the participants’ discussion. Whether engaging in classroom-based research, investigating ways to improve their own practices, participating in conferences, or finding resources in libraries and Internet sites, the participants demonstrate self-motivated, purposeful learning that directly influences the quality of their work with young children. Learning is socially constructed, in interaction with others. The participants demonstrate involvement in collaborative learning communities with other educators, researchers, and experienced early childhood practitioners.

*It would be lovely to have a mentor that came around and helped teachers. We used to have a mentor and it was wonderful because she helped you think about your environment because when you are working, you get very absorbed and
often don’t notice things. It is wonderful to have outside eyes to come to support us. I also think it is good to get together with other teachers because it helps not only to validate what you are doing, but it also gives you new ideas. It is terrible for people to work in isolation. You need other colleagues. (Caitlin, VP)

In their work with young children, the participants show that they make and justify decisions on the basis of their knowledge of the central issues, professional values and standards, and research findings in their field. The educators display a critical stance, examining their own work, sources of professional knowledge, and the early childhood field with a questioning attitude. Their work demonstrates that they do not simply accept a simplistic source of “truth” but recognize that while early childhood educators share the same core professional values, they do not agree on all of the field’s central questions. They demonstrate an understanding that, through dialogue and attention to differences, early childhood professionals will continue to reach new levels of shared knowledge.

We need to have people that trust you and allow you to make change. I think also teachers supporting each other. One day a teacher came to me and said, “I really want to try setting up this area in a different way.” I have to trust them and give them opportunity to make change. Sometimes, things don’t work, but I think that is how you learn as a team. (Janice, LP)

Finally, early childhood educators demonstrate that they can engage in informed advocacy for children and the profession. They are aware of, and engaged in, examining ethical issues and societal concerns about program quality and provision of early childhood services and the implications of these issues for advocacy and policy change.

I think it is important for teachers to feel a sense of community among their peers.
and collaborate that way. It is important to have teacher training and workshops to keep us inspired, give us new ideas, and stuff like that. You also need financial support to give children good materials. You also need support from school and the government because the municipality runs all of the preschools in Italy. We don’t have that, which makes it challenging. We need to keep going and keep advocating because the schools in Italy worked really hard to get that. We will get there one day. (Anna, VP)

DAP is one of the best known guidelines that define a universal child rearing practice from the United States. Because definition of educational quality is regarded as a process of identifying and applying objective and indisputable knowledge, the process itself receives relatively little attention or further justification. Once defined, criteria are then offered to others and applied to the process or product under consideration. This knowledge is presented as a universal truth that is culture free and applicable equally anywhere in the field under consideration (Dahlberg, et al., 1999). In the next chapter, I provide discussion and explorations of the study’s implications, limitations, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 5

Reggio Emilia: Its Visions and Its Challenges for Early Childhood Educators

Something we learned from Reggio is that your program should be rooted in the very culture where you live because that is the relevant culture of the children. So we need to be rooted right here in the rain forest. We do not live in the Italian piazza. (Caitlin, VP)

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the research findings by comparing and contrasting the participants’ understandings about the learning space and the philosophy of Reggio Emilia in Italy. Next, I present several insights and implications for teachers and parents in creating an environment for young children. Finally, I propose further study needed in the conception of space for young children.

Discussion of Research Findings

We tend to interpret the messages that the space gives about the quality of care and the program's foundational educational choices on the basis of our personal experiences and knowledge. One of the main goals of this discussion is to share my ideas about how to help early childhood professionals to learn from the participants’ experiences. I want to take up some of the issues involved in this effort, first by looking briefly at the language that the participants used in discussions of learning space. Second, I address how the different communities of educators talk about teaching and learning based on relationship. And third, I pose some questions about issues in adapting the Reggio Emilia approach in particular context.
**Reggio Emilia-inspired Environment**

Throughout the study, the participants focused on three significant issues when they reflected on Reggio Emilia-inspired environments for young children’s learning: materials, aesthetics, and documentation. First, the participants believe that children need to have access to a wide range of materials to stimulate and support their play. Materials should be well-organized and readily accessible. Participants suggested that materials for dramatic play should reflect mixed gender roles, and cultural diversity and encourage small group interaction. Some younger children may need to be assisted to use materials. Second, several participants stressed the importance of creating the sense of well-being that an aesthetically-pleasing and well-kept classroom provides. Finally, the concept of making the learning visible requires a number of participants to collect the children’s works and experiences in as many types of media as possible. I now examine aspects of the Reggio Emilia philosophy and broader observable practice that appear contrary to participants’ beliefs about space for children’s learning.

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<th>Reggio Emilia schools</th>
<th>Participants’ programs</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Children (age and ethnicity)</strong></td>
<td>Children age 0 to 6 Ethnically increasingly diverse</td>
<td>Children age 3-5 Ethnically diverse</td>
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<td><strong>Teacher ratio</strong></td>
<td>2 teachers per class (25 children per class)  Have a service of atelierista (studio teacher) and pedagogista (mentor)</td>
<td>2-3 teachers per class Teacher: children = 1: 8 (No studio teacher/ mentor)</td>
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<td>Reggio Emilia schools</td>
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<td><strong>Hours open</strong></td>
<td>Monday-Friday: 8 a.m.- 4 p.m.</td>
<td>Preschool: 2-3 hrs per day. Daycare: 8 a.m.- 6 p.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial support</strong></td>
<td>From city government (municipality)</td>
<td>Mostly from the parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project/ Curriculum</strong></td>
<td>Project or <em>progettazione</em>, child-originated</td>
<td>Emergent curriculum, child centred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The image of the child</strong></td>
<td>Constructor of knowledge</td>
<td>Reproducer or consumer of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Settings</strong></td>
<td>Culturally homogeneous</td>
<td>Culturally diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Construction of childhood</strong></td>
<td>Childhood is considered as a social construction within an actively negotiated set of social relations</td>
<td>Mostly, childhood is considered as a preparatory stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The role of teacher</strong></td>
<td>Co-learner or co-researcher</td>
<td>Knowledge provider, facilitator, moderator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community/Government perspective</strong></td>
<td>Childcare services as a collective responsibility</td>
<td>Leave to the forces of a free market economy, except non-profit organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concept of early childhood education</strong></td>
<td>ECE is carried out for the benefit of all the children of a community</td>
<td>ECE is seen primarily as a service to support working parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 A Broader Comparison of the Pre-primary Program in Reggio Emilia schools and Reggio Emilia Inspired Programs in Lower Mainland
The study shows that there are some similarities and differences in teachers’ beliefs about the meanings and the roles of environment for young children. I compare and contrast participants’ understandings or beliefs about the environment in relation to each other and the philosophy of Reggio Emilia in Italy. There are different interpretations of the concept of the environment as the third teacher among the participants. I have begun to realize that this concept is much more complex than any set of guidelines for appropriate equipment, materials, room arrangement, and display.

According to Malaguzzi (1993), the concept of school environment is tied to our image of the child; knowledge and ongoing study of any given group of children, teachers, and parents; our understanding of the concept of scaffolding; our use of documentation; and our ways of thinking about organization of time and relations among all members of the learning community. This concept of space continues to be developed as we learn to scrutinize every bit of space in the early childhood program.

**Emergent Curriculum**

The Reggio Curriculum is not child-centered or teacher-directed; it is ‘child originated’ and ‘teacher framed’ (Forman & Fyfe, 1998). In Rinaldi’s (2006) work, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching and learning*, she proposed that the terms “emergent curriculum,” “project curriculum,” or “integrated curriculum” could not describe the process of planning and working with children precisely as experienced in Reggio Emilia. Derived from methods or ways of working developed elsewhere, Rinaldi stated that these words are inappropriate because “curriculum” and “lesson planning” are unsuitable for representing the complex strategies for sustaining children’s knowledge-building processes. Rinaldi preferred to use the terms *project* and *progettazione* to define
this complex situation, to describe the multiple levels of action, carried out in the
dialogue between children and adults.

Most participants mentioned that they were taking the perspective of emergent
curriculum. They recognize that it is important to study the ideas expressed in children’s
words, drawings, paintings, and play. They also know that this will help them learn how
to scaffold further learning, but the process of interpreting dialogue and hypothesizing
possible lines of a project is often unfamiliar. Some teachers mentioned that even though
they did not understand the Reggio Emilia philosophy and method fully, they try to
follow children’s interests through observation first, and then provide an environment
that both provokes children’s in-depth exploration and reflects what the children have
already learned.

We are inspired by the emerging curriculum. A project could take weeks or
months depending on the children’s interest. If they have a lot of questions or
misconceptions, we can focus on their problems and help them to understand. If
there is an interest, we can keep going. (Danika, VP)

When we work on themes or project, we will send the parents email. For example,
this month we are working on a science project. Is there anybody who have some
ideas and thought about it? Please bring it in and I will invite someone who is a
scientist and works on campus, so we can go to a real science lab. (Erica, RP)

Child-Centred Approach

In Reggio Emilia, being child-centred implies that the child is an autonomous and
isolated being. Rather they would say that relationships—between children, parents,
pedagogues and society—are at the centre of everything they do. According to Malaguzzi
(1993), the early childhood institution is viewed as ‘an integral living organism, a place of shared lives and relationships among many adults and very many children” (p. 56).

Similar to many early childhood programs in North America, the participants say that they are taking the perspective of the child and that their pedagogical practice is child-centred. According to Dahlberg et al. (1999), child-centeredness seems to be an unproblematic concept; however, it is very abstract and rather problematic in practice. This term “child-centred” can be viewed as a particular modernist understanding of the child as a subject that can be treated apart from relationships and context. They observe the children’s conversation and play and provide materials to provoke the children’s learning as well as arranging an environment that follows the children’s interests.

**Scientific Child**

In many of the discussions, the opinion was expressed that the child’s strength and remarkable abilities, as made visible by the schools of Reggio Emilia, have not generally been recognized or promoted by North American society. Malaguzzi (1998) agreed with Piaget that the aim of teaching is to provide conditions for learning; however, Malaguzzi also believed that this needed to include an understanding of children as producers, not just consumers, of knowledge and culture. Children have a recognized and independent place in society, with their own rights as individual human beings and full members of society. Childhood is understood not as a preparatory stage, but as a component of the structure of society and important in its own right as one stage of the life course (Mayall, 1996).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) has been a huge influence in determining a very widely-based image of the child, one that many educators and policy
makers accepted as the way to work with young children. According to Dahlberg et al. (1999), the image of the scientific child represents a young child who is defined either through abstract notions of maturity or through stages of development. This scientific child is a biologically-based construction much favoured by developmental psychology.

The participants believe that children learn through concrete experiences and try to make sense of the world around them through their play. The participants described their programs as play-based, focusing on age-appropriate experiences and activities that reflected the children’s interests and developmental levels. Despite frequent talk about a holistic perspective, this image of the child is frequently reduced to separate and measurable categories, such as social development, intellectual development, and motor development.

> We believe that the children learn through hands-on activities. It is through their play that they make sense of the world and what is going on. My role is to observe children responding to the environment and create other opportunities to expand their interests and other ideas into deeper exploration. (Gianna, BD)

**Reproducer of Knowledge, Skills, and Culture**

Malaguzzi (1998) stated that the Reggio schools for young children are not viewed as a preparation for primary school, or in providing continuity of learning with the primary school. He believed that the schools for young children should respond to the here-and-now of children’s lives and assist them to realize their potential in the broadest possible way. In contrast, most participants mentioned that one of the contributions of an early childhood program is to prepare children to be ready to learn and to be ready for future schooling and life. The participants expected that children would be filled with
knowledge, skills, and dominant cultural values which are already predetermined, such as being independent, being able to communicate and follow rules and guidelines. Viewed from this perspective, early childhood is seen as the first stage in the process of reproduction of the dominant values of capitalism, including individualism, competitiveness, and consumption (Dahlberg et al., 1999).

*We hope that most places would prepare the children for life and excitement in learning for the rest of their journey in school. I was a big fan of elementary school. I had fun, but the way the teacher taught wasn't really fun, so I had to be excited for the learning outcome. I would hope that school would give children excitement about learning and give them basis about social skills to make the rest of their journey to school and eventually life easier.* (Irene, LP)

**Educator as Facilitator**

In Reggio Emilia, teachers consider themselves as partners in the process of children’s learning (Gandini, 1993). The role of the teachers as partners and co-learners is well presented when children and teachers engage in collaborative learning during a project. The educators of Reggio Emilia learn and re-learn with the children, as well as provide children with the opportunity to give shape to their experience, not just to be shaped by an experience. It is their recognition of not knowing that enables educators to continue to search for a greater understanding of how children learn to learn (Malaguzzi, 1998).

On the other hand, most participants believe in the role of the teacher as a facilitator in children’s learning. The participants mentioned that young children are still learning how to communicate, so they try to have engaged conversations by acting as
facilitators in that process. They expect children to learn to listen to one another, ask questions, and become more independent. Moreover, several participants saw their role as moderator or negotiator with children, by helping the children to solve conflicts or understand other points of view. The role of the teacher is to guide the children through what they are exploring in an activity or a project.

*Our role as a teacher is to guide them through what they are seeing. Whether it is an activity or project we are working on, we allow them to try it their way, but we also show them in a gentle way, kind of guiding them to a better understanding of what they are seeing. Our goal is more like a moderator.* (Erica, RP)

**Community Involvement**

In Reggio Emilia schools, the structure of community-based management involving people across the social spectrum is central to the educational experience and demonstrates a system of relationships characterized by communication, collaboration, and participation. The educators in Reggio Emilia schools spoke about a sense of community where nobody is anonymous, and where grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbours, and friends play a significant part in each other’s lives. In this study, children, teachers, and parents were found to be involved in children’s learning; however, community involvement was relatively rare. The participants indicate the scarce possibility of real interaction and communication, except for a fieldtrip or a walk in the local park.

**Individuality and Independence**

The strong orientation to the opinions and needs of others as demonstrated in Reggio Emilia classroom is contrary to the value of independence and individuality in
North America. According to Edwards et al. (1998), Reggio Emilia is known for its very high level of participatory democracy and civic community, which are fundamental to what Reggio educators feel about their educational vision and mission. The recognition of social constructivism as a crucial aspect of learning has resulted in a continuous search for an educational approach that confronts the traditional emphasis on the individual, and prefers to view the educational unit as a group of individuals. Many participants acknowledged the high priority of children’s social relations and each child’s social development. As such, the participants mentioned that they strive to support children’s pro-social behaviours such as being friendly, cooperative, or helpful. Yet, such strategies are designed to foster the child’s competencies in ways that promote the individual rather than the group.

Cultural Differences

Rinaldi (2006) proposed that Reggio is not a model or “best practice” because the municipal schools and the work in them arise from a particular context. In Italian culture, the value of social discourse often appears in the form of discussions in the sharing of opinions and ideas. Italians have a strong sense of shared responsibility for children as it is manifested at the individual, local and state levels. Moreover, the beauty and harmony of the environment and the methodical care for the living space of the home, along with the design of spaces that favour social interaction, are essential elements of Italian culture. The ethic of inclusion is manifest in the Italian community social norms as well as educational policies regarding children with special needs.

In North America, there are diverse cultural and historical backgrounds and diverse educational systems. Early childhood education is considered a private issue
reflecting the broader North American cultural value of independence. Most Canadians consider themselves as citizens in a pluralistic society where cultural and social diversity is accepted and even appreciated. Multicultural education centres on teaching children about other cultures in an attempt to combat racial prejudice and stereotypes. The participants proposed that educators should consider the diverse backgrounds of the families who are part of their programmes and they should work with parents to understand the cultural and linguistic values and goals parents have for their children.

**Implications of the Study**

The participants in the daycare and preschools that are inspired by Reggio Emilia focus explicitly on school environments, where children’s social and intellectual developments are enriched. Teachers believe that the space for children’s learning is rich and complex, and that it supports relationships between people and ideas. Aesthetics is an important part of the learning environment as it shows respect to people in the space, children and adults. The educators carefully consider the physical environment in light of their educational philosophy, both in terms of the objects in the environment and in terms of the kinds of spaces for learning experiences.

**Implications of Physical Environment**

Most participants mentioned their attempt to organize an aesthetically pleasing environment for children and offer a richer and more varied assortment of materials. These are concrete ways in which the participants embraced what they have seen as valuable features of the learning environment of Reggio Emilia schools, which include the following:

- The use of mirrors, natural light, and information panels to create the entry
that welcomes, invites, and communicates the joy of learning and a sense of belonging;

- A variety of found, recycled, purchased materials that can be used by children and teachers to explore and express ideas and feelings;
- The addition of light tables to enable children to explore color and texture of materials with the added perspective of light; and
- The cleaning, painting, and reorganizing of space to present orderly, uncluttered, comfortable, defined areas that support a variety of learning possibilities for small groups of children.

**Implications of Listening and Observing**

Slowing down to observe and listen to children seems to run counter to our value of productivity. Parents’ expectations often equate productivity with how many activities are completed within a day. An administrator also wants to know how much of the curriculum is covered in a given period of time. Many participants comment that as they pursue the goal to listen more effectively to children, they have learned to spend more focused time with individual children or small groups of children. This concept challenges a belief that a teacher must be responsive and available to all children at all times (Fyfe, 1994).

The focus on listening to children requires a kind of ongoing negotiation and exchange that is not familiar to most teachers. This has not been easy because the participants need to reorganize themselves to let one work for an extended and uninterrupted period of time with a small group while the other supervises the larger group. The participants value the process of exploring children’s ideas, theories,
questions, and opinions. They can see that these kinds of interactions with children support positive dispositions toward learning as well as perseverance and depth of learning. They realize that experience must be connected with reflection. While listening and observing children’s learning seem like simple processes, they require teachers to reorganize themselves, their time, the environment, and their relationship with co-teachers. Documentation offers vital information to teachers about themselves and their children and it brings families into the children’s lives. Here are some of the ways that documentation is used in the participants’ schools:

- For children to connect to and reflect on their own work, as well as on other children’s work
- For adults to reflect on children’s work and hypothesize about where their work with children might go next
- For families to experience the work and explorations of their children
- For the community at large to understand what is happening inside the program.

**Implications of Involving Parents**

Instead of merely organizing parties, driving on field trips, and being interested primarily in their own children, the parents should know and understand what the teachers do in school with all the children. Then, the parents will offer their skills in many ways, from sharing a hobby like cooking or carpentry to leading workshops for parents. Together, the parents and the teachers plan and orchestrate celebrations with the children, such as a holiday party. All the parents are informed about daily life in school through various channels, such as journals, documentation books, parent-teacher
committee meetings and other small-group parent meetings. The aim of parent meetings, with the aid of documentation, is to show and share the processes, the theories, and the insights of the children with the parents.

**Implications of Reflection and Change**

We have to start from where we are in our own traditions and culture. Hence, our understanding of Reggio Emilia is not in any sense a true description of Reggio Emilia, but is rather a construction in which we have built an understanding of their practice in relation to our experience and knowledge. The participants have used the Reggio Emilia experience as a form of inspiration that helps them to reflect on and question their own tradition and pedagogical practices. As I have argued throughout the study, early childhood institutions and their pedagogical practices are constituted by dominant discourses in our society. Therefore, to change a pedagogical practice, it is necessary to start by deconstructing these discourses and to understand how they are related to what is going on in pedagogical practice. The Reggio Emilia philosophy has helped us to create a space for the reinterpretation and reconstruction not only of the child, but also of the pedagogue and of the early childhood institution. Though reflective practice, we have been able to understand how our own thinking and practices are inscribed in dominant discourses, which has helped us to understand that there are other possibilities—alternative discourses.

**Limitations and Further Directions**

This study is exploratory. Several limitations of the study render the interpretation difficult. First, the number of participants is small and the selection was not random. I conducted an interview with only one participant who works in a daycare program as
opposed to a preschool that was inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy. From my perspective, it cannot reflect the overall understanding of teachers who work in daycare settings. Therefore, there is a need to study teachers in more daycare settings. Most participants’ schools were located on the affluent area of a western Canadian city. Therefore, the study does not reflect the greater population of the area. Future studies should include a greater range of communities.

Second, in this study, the role of environment in children’s learning was investigated through the teachers’ testimonies and reflections on their experiences, rather than scrutinized by the detailed observation of the specific environments and children’s experiences in the environment. Therefore, the result reflects teachers’ thoughts and opinions and excludes children’s or parents’ opinions. Also, the definitions and descriptions of the learning environment in this study were generated by the teachers and might not include all significant aspects of the environment. In future research, direct research on the physical space would help to supplement our understanding of the influence of the environment on young children’s learning. Adopting standard measures would help to clarify the educational roles of physical environment for children’s learning. Also, a follow-up study designed to compare educators that have been inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach with educators who have adopted different philosophies, such as Montessori or Waldorf, might provide further insight.

Third, this study briefly describes differences between the environment in Reggio Emilia schools and the environment in participants’ schools in terms of philosophical space. However, it should be noted that with regard to the other areas of environment, such as physical space, intellectual space and emotional space, there are likely to be more
variations and differences among teachers in a single school. Therefore, in-depth case studies should be conducted to extend this exploratory study to understand further meanings behind organizing and designing the learning environment for young children.

Finally, the definitions and descriptions of environment in this study did not include one of the most important areas of the environment, which was the physical aspect. The participants might not have wanted to convey that it was not just the physical environment and materials that needed reconfiguring in these programs, but the daily routines, use of time, structures, communications, and relationships that had to be in place if the environment was to be effectively cared for and used. Moreover, the participants might not have wanted to mention about their physical environment because they felt that they did not have control over their resources. When they mentioned the barriers, they focused on things such as lack of financial resources, staff turnover, building limitations, and the lack of public will for policies and legislation to make children an economic priority. The providers who work in the space shared with another group often found it a tremendous challenge to continually set up and take down the environment they have created.

Despite these limitations, this study represents one of the first examinations of early childhood educators’ understanding of the role of environment, as inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, in a western Canadian city. Such a study, by way of exposing divergent belief systems, leads to a better understanding of the relationship between cultural values, teacher goals and expectations, educational practices, and conceptions of the role of environment. As such, one of the primary values of becoming acquainted with Reggio Emilia-- as with all comparative research in early childhood-- is to force us to
reflect upon our own beliefs and practices. The findings presented in this study suggest that such an interpretation of environment is highly dependent on teachers’ and other adults’ views of development and that variations in practices may reflect cultural differences in both beliefs about, and expectations for, their children. In order to move beyond traditional rituals and responsibilities associated with the early childhood setting, more extensive research in early childhood environments is needed.

**Conclusion**

The early childhood field in North America has formed standards to help educators recognize quality programs for children. The professional standards stress the importance of an orderly, safe environment; learning areas; and materials that are culturally and developmentally appropriate. As I was searching for information about the learning environment, I found several studies that provide developed rating scales and assessment tools to support educators to reach for higher quality. I have images of familiar room arrangements with the same type of learning areas and materials. Children spend the early years of their childhood in cookie-cutter, sterilized, commercialized settings. Homogenization and institutionalization are sprouting up everywhere in early childhood programs. Young children are organized around schedules, standards, checklists, and assessment tools.

Through my reflection, I am able to see how the standards and models have begun to limit my thinking and how commercialization has shaped more and more of what I do. The participants have developed a shared language of education. Central to their goal is promoting the development of unique individuals. Their language of education, very different from that in Reggio Emilia, is based on a theory of knowledge that sees thinking
and learning as a matter of each child gaining knowledge of self, others, and the wider world through social interaction, research, and discussion processes that stimulate the development of mature autonomy and self-realization. In contrast, the language of education preferred in Reggio Emilia focuses teachers’ attention on children always in relation to group, not in terms of what the children gain from it across specific domains. Indeed, it appeared that the interviews involved in the study provoked the teachers to consider the limitations of both their own and the community’s discourse and practices.
REFERENCES


New, R. (1990). Excellent early education: A city in Italy has it! *Young Children*, 45(6), 4-10.


Appendix A: Dialogue with Teachers - Focused Interview Questions

Teacher Information

1. How long have you been teaching in the early childhood program?
2. What do you feel are the most important contributions of the early childhood program?
3. How do you see your role regarding decision making about the classroom environment?
4. What are the important factors early childhood educators should consider when they make decisions about the classroom environment?

Early Childhood Program Information

1. What is your program’s philosophy and how does it relate to the Reggio Emilia approach?
2. How is the curriculum of this program influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach?
3. What range of activities/time do children experience in this program?
4. What is the range of choices and possibilities available to the children in this program?

Environment Information

1. What is your understanding of the environment in children’s learning?
2. Are there key principles of this particular early childhood education program that are reflected in the classroom environment?
3. What is your personal rationale for creating a classroom environment for children’s learning?
4. How are aesthetics addressed in each aspect of the classroom environment?
5. Different areas of an environment have different qualities. How do children use each area? Where do they like to go? Which areas do not entice them?

6. How does the creation of the children’s learning environment affect the quality of an early childhood education program?

7. What are the challenges of creating and working in an environment for children’s learning?

8. In which ways do teachers need to be supported to work in or create a classroom environment for children’s learning?
The Initial Letter of Contact to the Educator

Invitation:
You are being invited to participate in a study designed to investigate teachers’ beliefs about the importance of the early childhood classroom environment to children’s learning. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with each teacher. The time commitment will be an hour interview. Data source will be interview notes, audio digital files and photos of the classroom environment without any child/adult present. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim.

If, after reading the below information you are still wish to participate in/facilitate this study please return the enclosed consent form to the co-investigator Ladda Prasertsintanah, (604) 561-3129.

Principal Investigators: Dr. Marilyn Chapman, Professor of Education, UBC Faculty of Education, Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research (604)-822-8234.

Co-Investigator(s):
Ladda Prasertsintanah, Graduate Student, UBC Faculty of Education, Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research (604)-561-3129.

Purpose of the study:
The study’s purpose is to investigate what teachers’ understanding of the role of the early childhood classroom environment in children’s learning.

The objective is:
To interview teachers regarding their understanding of the role of the early childhood classroom environment in children’s learning and how they make decisions regarding the classroom environment.
A final report will be sent to a yet undecided professional journal that may contain quotes; made by the participants during interviews with the researcher.

**Study Procedures:**

The time commitment will be an hour semi-structured interview class (this interview method allows the researcher to follow an agenda of questions; however, it also offers the researcher the opportunity to follow up on any interesting leads that flow from responses to questions). Interviews will be audio taped. Photos of classroom environment without children/adults will be taken. Interviews will take place over a one-month period in November of 2007.

**Interview:**
The investigators will ask question such as:

**Teacher Information**

1. How long have you been teaching in the early childhood program?
2. What do you feel are the most important contributions of the early childhood program?
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3. What is your personal rationale for creating a classroom environment for children’s learning?
4. How are esthetics addressed in each aspect of the classroom environment?
Confidentiality:
Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. All documents will be identified only by code number and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Subjects will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study unless you so choose. All audio taped recordings will be destroyed through electronic demagnetizing five years after the study’s completion. All computer records will be kept on a secondary data storage device (Flash/Zip or floppy) not on a hard drive and kept in a locked file cabinet and destroyed five years after the study’s completion, likewise through demagnetizing.

Contact for information about the study:
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact [Principal Investigator] Dr. Marilyn Chapman at 604-822-8234.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:
Direct all concerns about treatment or rights as a research subject to Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.
Statement of Informed Consent (copy to keep)

Title of the project: “Teachers’ understandings and beliefs about the role of the environment in children’s learning”

Principal Investigator: Dr. Marilyn Chapman University of British Columbia

Please fill out the information below.
Be sure to keep p. 1 to 4 for your own records and to return a signed copy of page 5 (Statement of Informed Consent) to the co-investigator Ladda Prasertsintanah within the next two weeks.

I have read and understand the attached letter regarding the project entitled “Teachers’ understandings and beliefs about the role of the environment in children’s learning” I have kept copies of both the letter describing the project and a consent form (Statement of Informed Consent).

I consent to participate in this study.

____________________________________________________
Printed name

____________________________________________________
Teacher Signature Date
Statement of Informed Consent (copy to return)

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I consent to participate in this study.

____________________________
Printed name

____________________________
Teacher Signature Date
The Initial Letter of Contact to the Institution

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4. How are esthetics addressed in each aspect of the classroom environment?

Confidentiality:
Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. All documents will be identified only by code number and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Subjects will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study unless you so choose.
All audio taped recordings will be destroyed through electronic demagnetizing five years after the study’s completion. All computer records will be kept on a secondary data storage device (Flash/Zip or floppy) not on a hard drive and kept in a locked file cabinet and destroyed five years after the study’s completion, likewise through demagnetizing.

**Contact for information about the study:**
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact [Principal Investigator] Dr. Marilyn Chapman at 604-822-8234.

**Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:**
Direct all concerns about treatment or rights as a research subject to Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

**Consent:**
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following: