

Realizing Children's Rights in a Global Context:

Glocalization of the Reggio Emilia Experience

Marisa Galliano Macy

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4676-9865>

University of Wyoming, USA

Emer Ring

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8459-8625>

University of Limerick, Ireland

Alessandra Landini

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5954-6030>

I.C. Manzoni in Reggio Emilia, Italy

Table of Contents

Foreword	xv
Preface	xx
Acknowledgment	xxxii
Introduction	xxxiii
 Chapter 1	
“Two Wings of a Butterfly”: Promoting the Right to Play Through a Playful Approach to Learning in Global Contexts	1
<i>Lisa Goddard, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy</i>	
<i>Maria Barbara Donnici, Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy</i>	
<i>Elisa Ferrari, Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy</i>	
 Chapter 2	
Close and Beyond Reggio Emilia: San Miniato and Children’s Protagonism in Education	35
<i>Aldo Fortunati, La Bottega di Geppetto, Italy</i>	
 Chapter 3	
Children's Right to Ecological Thinking: The Reggio Emilia Approach in the Era of Environmental Crisis.....	59
<i>Eloisa Di Rocco, Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy</i>	
 Chapter 4	
Fostering Children’s Rights to Literacy Through the Reggio Emilia Approach	89
<i>Pamela Beach, Queen's University, Canada</i>	
 Chapter 5	
An Absolute Possibility: The Reggio Emilia Approach in Diverse Settings in South Africa.....	111
<i>Sarah Jane Browne, Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (AREA), South Africa & Reddam House Waterfall Early Learning School, South Africa</i>	

Chapter 6

- Children's Rights in Action at Acorn 165
Rosalba Bortolotti, Acorn Collaborative, Canada

Chapter 7

- Moving Beyond Reggio Emilia's "Special Rights" to a Rights-Based
Response for All Children in the Irish Context: Learning From the Reggio
Emilia Experience..... 187
Emer Ring, Mary Immaculate College, Ireland
Lisha O'Sullivan, Mary Immaculate College, Ireland

Chapter 8

- Reimagining Education Through Participation, Dialogue, and Listening:
Local Communities, Global Perspectives 219
Benedetta Melloni, Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy
Elisa Ferrari, Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy
Mara Davoli, Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy
Alfonso Trillicoso, Istituto Comprensivo "A. Manzoni", Italy

Chapter 9

- Children's Right to Early Education: Bridging Reggio Emilia Philosophy
With Global Educational Practices 245
Ashraf Alam, Alliance University, Bengaluru, India

Chapter 10

- Other Worlds and Other Possibilities: Re-Envisioning Early Childhood
and Children's Rights Through Collaboration of a Child's Global World of
Community, School, and Family..... 277
Judith N. Levin, Independent Researcher, USA
Angela Vatalaro, Independent Researcher, USA
Suzette Turner, University of Central Florida, USA
Kelcie Burke, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
Marisa Galliano Macy, University of Wyoming, USA

Chapter 11

Enacting Children's Rights Through Reggio Emilia-Inspired Practices In Türkiye: The Quilt-Making Project	311
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Hatice Zeynep Inan, Sam Houston State University, USA

Melissa Dawn Gatlin, Sam Houston State University, USA

Aysenur Gungor-Kircadag, Naturel Forest Preschool and Primary School, Turkey

Compilation of References	345
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About the Contributors	393
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Index.....	401
-------------------	------------

Preface

A Compass for Navigating Children's Rights

How do people get from one place to another? Navigation. A compass is a tool for navigation that can provide ways for locating places and directions. Navigation endeavors could benefit from a tool, like a compass, to arrive at the chosen destination.

Together with all of our contributors, we perceive this book, *Realizing Children's Rights in a Global Context: Glocalization of the Reggio Emilia Experience*, together with the other volume in this series: *Reggio Emilia-Inspired Pedagogies of Listening and Inclusion: Advancing Children's Rights*, as compasses for navigating a journey of exploration around the rights of babies, toddlers and young children to support readers in arriving at a chosen destination where the rights of all children are realized. Across the chapters, the rights-based philosophy guides early childhood education ideas for babies, toddlers, and young children as seen through the lens from Reggio Emilia, Italy to offer a framework within which children's rights can be realized in practice. Loris Malaguzzi, a pedagogist who led Reggio Emilia early childhood education efforts, referred to the context during which the approach was developed in the period following World War II as, "everything was still violently topsy-turvy" (Gandini, 2011, p. 27). This resonates with the current context globally whereby children may experience uncertainty, volatility, and complexity associated with childhoods affected by the erosion of rights, natural disasters, conflict, poverty, crisis, and the ongoing longitudinal impact of the worldwide health crisis related to COVID-19 (Ring et al., 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2026).

Despite robust research evidence underscoring the benefits of high-quality early childhood experiences on children's immediate and long-term cognitive, health, sociability and education outcomes, underinvestment continues to undermine children's opportunities in this regard (Heckman 2008; 2012; Doyle, 2025). The focus

on children's rights and agency reflects the change in our understanding of children and childhood that is mirrored in the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD]. Crucially, this change in our understanding challenges communities globally to assess their policies and practices through a rights-based lens (UN, 1989; 2006).

Where this topic fits in the world today depends on several complex factors. The authors who have contributed to this edited book seek to identify barriers, explore solutions, and strengthen an international commitment to the rights of every child. The book is comprised of an introductory chapter and a collection of eleven chapters that provide interdisciplinary professionals across the globe with an opportunity to reflect on the application of the early childhood education philosophy derived from Reggio Emilia, Italy for realizing the rights of children. The target audience for the book includes but is not limited to: (a) educators and interdisciplinary professionals already in the workforce, (b) pre-service professionals who are in college settings, (c) academics from institutions of higher education (e.g., community colleges and universities), and (d) policy makers.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK TO NAVIGATE THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

This book can in effect be used as a compass to navigate children's rights across the multiple layers of the unique ecosystem that each child inhabits. The chapters can be read as stand alone, or thematically. Over forty authors from across multiple continents have contributed to the two volumes in this series. Four of the authors are from Africa, two from Canada, one from India, six from Ireland, fourteen from Italy, one from Spain, three from Turkey, and twelve from the USA. Authors' locations on the map include:

Figure 1.



- Bengaluru, India
- Boise, Idaho, USA
- Bornova, Turkey
- Boston, Massachusetts, USA
- Huntsville, Texas, USA
- Johannesburg, South Africa
- Kingston, Ontario, Canada
- Laramie, Wyoming, USA
- Limerick, Ireland
- Lincoln, Nebraska, USA
- Madrid, Spain
- Omaha, Nebraska, USA
- Orlando, Florida, USA
- Reggio Emilia, Italy
- Samsun, Turkey
- San Miniato, Italy
- Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- West Bengal, India
- Zambia, Africa

The introductory chapter and subsequent eleven chapters in this book surface a set of interconnected themes that collectively position the child as a central rights-bearing protagonist. It begins by foregrounding the child's right to play, learn, and develop, emphasizing their agency in shaping their own experiences. This perspective

extends into a broader understanding of the child as an active participant within political, social, and natural environments, highlighting their role as an individual with rights in relation to the world around them. Building on this, the discussion turns to the child's right to access, participate in, and benefit from early childhood education, underscoring the importance of equitable and meaningful educational opportunities. The narrative further explores how a Reggio Emilia rights-based approach informs relationships among children, parents, families, teachers, and the wider community. It concludes by emphasizing that children's rights to high-quality services are realized through the ongoing professional development of the early childhood workforce.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Introduction~ “Mapping Possibility: True North for Early Childhood Systems”

In the introductory chapter, Marisa Galliano Macy, Emer Ring, and Alessandra Landini question the concept of inclusion and its application to systems of early childhood education. Tracing the evolution of children's rights internationally, the authors identify the rights of young children to access, participate in, and be supported in early childhood education programs. The challenges and opportunities for realizing these rights within existing systems are considered. Based on the authors' experiences, the chapter shares “lessons” for inclusion and participation as viewed through the Reggio Emilia perspective on early childhood education.

CH. 1~ “Two Wings of a Butterfly”: Promoting the Right to Play Through a Playful Approach to Learning in Global Contexts”

Lisa Goddard, Maria Barbara Donnici, and Elisa Ferrari remind us that from the outset, the United Nations declarations concerning childhood have referenced education and play as fundamental human rights. Drawing on the Reggio philosophy, the authors demonstrate how the right to play can become tangible in educational practice. Through detailing international projects and collaborations, the chapter explores how Reggio-inspired practices worldwide can translate the values of play as a form of knowledge-making into a fundamental support that cultivates and enables children's rights.

CH. 2~ “Close and Beyond Reggio Emilia. San Miniato and Children's Protagonism in Education”

Aldo Fortunati describes the experience of San Miniato and its idea of “children's education as a community project” in terms of a community-wide commitment that resonates strongly with Reggio Emilia's philosophy. Adopting a socio-constructivist perspective, the author observes how the pedagogy espoused by Malaguzzi embraces changes. The chapter, in a dialogue with an interpretation of Malaguzzi's thought,

explains how this experience, even in its specificity, in pursuing children's best interests, can define that children are the most important global priority we face as humanity.

CH. 3~ "Children's Right to Develop Ecological Thinking: The Reggio Emilia Approach in the Era of Environmental Crisis"

In this chapter, Eloisa Di Rocco describes children as active individuals in the environment, capable of encountering the world, and self-supporting their ecological thinking. The chapter defines how children are entitled to enter this public debate, and why Reggio Emilia's pedagogy can be seen as a cultural and ethical posture to redefine the meaning of educating and living in this critical era. The author argues that children have the right to experience other presences as possible encounters and not necessarily as dangers, to feel part of a rich, complex, and vibrant ecosystem that shapes them and that they can shape with harmonious responsibility.

CH. 4~ "Fostering Children's Rights to Literacy Through the Reggio Emilia Approach"

Pamela Beach identifies literacy as a fundamental human right and notes the contribution of being literate to empowerment, and supporting individuals in understanding their rights and responsibilities and enabling them to advocate for justice and equality. The author considers

the vital role of reading in the early childhood years and the potential for core literacy skills to be developed through play and exploration. Located in the principle of the hundred languages, the social construction of knowledge and the environment as the third teacher, the chapter explores the possibilities integral in the Reggio Emilia philosophy for nurturing children's early literacy.

CH. 5~ "An Absolute Possibility: The Reggio Emilia Approach in Diverse Settings in South Africa"

Sarah Browne considers the interpretation of the principles from Reggio Emilia against the historical and current policy background of early childhood education in South Africa. Describing how children's rights are regarded in a South African context and drawing on her own research, the author identifies how Reggio-inspired principles can open up possibilities for educational dialogue and possible reform. South Africa is described by the author as a diverse society with many cultures, economic backgrounds, and twelve official languages.

CH. 6~ "Children's Right in Action at Acorn"

Rosalba Bortolotti shares how the approach developed in Reggio Emilia offers a powerful pedagogical and cultural framework for realizing children's rights in early childhood education, particularly when located within a global context. In considering how children's rights are interpreted in a Canadian context, the author shares her experience of the Acorn School, which she founded and led, and which

was deeply influenced by her experience of studying and revisiting the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia over three decades.

CH. 7~ “Moving beyond Reggio Emilia’s ‘Special Rights’ to a Rights-Based Response for All Children in the Irish Context: Learning from the Reggio Emilia Experience”

Emer Ring and Lisha O’Sullivan reflect on the impact of embedding the Reggio Emilia inspired principles of the image of the child, the hundred languages of children, the pedagogy of listening and the environment as the third teacher in a professional learning program for teachers in Ireland. The authors draw on the principles, not as a model to replicate, but rather as principles to reflect on theory and practice in the specific context of the Irish curriculum framework and cultural context. An analysis of teachers’ professional portfolios suggests that these principles support the creation of an inclusive experience for all children.

CH. 8~ “Reimagining Education through Participation, Dialogue, and Listening: Local Communities, Global Perspectives”

Benedetta Melloni, Elisa Ferrari, Mara Davioli, and Alfonso Trillicoso provide insight into an action research project, *Peace Between Cultures*, which took place in a peripheral area of Reggio Emilia. The project confirms how the Reggio Emilia focus on supporting dialogue and the participation of children, teachers, families and the community can be extended outside of the classroom and cultivate shared understandings that mitigate social inequalities. The authors suggest that the school can be positioned as an agent of change that is capable of guiding processes of integration and exchange across cultures and sensitivities.

CH. 9~ “Children’s Right to Early Education: Bridging Reggio Emilia Philosophy with Global Educational Practices”

Ashraf Alam situates the evolution of the Reggio Emilia approach in its historical context and examines how the practices developed in Reggio Emilia can potentially address inequities in access and elevate participation as a pedagogical right. Commencing with a genealogical excavation of Reggio Emilia’s origins, the chapter explains its emergence as a counter-hegemonic educational movement in post-war Italy. The policy implications of adopting a Reggio-inspired and rights-based approach in diverse contexts is discussed, and future directions suggesting a paradigm shift from education *for* children to education *with* children.

CH. 10~ “Other Worlds and Other Possibilities: Re-envisioning Early Childhood and Children’s Rights through Collaboration of a Child’s Global World of Community, School, and Family”

Judith Levin, Angela Vatalaro, Kelcie Burke, Suzette Turner, and Marisa Galliano Macy describe a professional development community of practice for early childhood educators. Their chapter focuses on supporting children’s rights to a high-quality early childhood education by preparing educators with a study abroad to Reggio

Emilia, Italy. This chapter takes the reader on a journey to discovering alternatives to traditional professional development. The outcomes indicate the value of living and learning in Reggio Emilia that result in shifts in thinking about developmentally appropriate practices and the importance of interaction between community, school, and family.

CH. 11~ “Enacting children’s rights through Reggio Emilia–inspired practices in Türkiye: The Quilt-Making Project”

Hatice Inan, Melissa Dawn Gatlin, and Aysenur Gungor-Kircadag map an expedition that weaves together artistic inquiry, cultural heritage, intergenerational knowledge, and the realization of children’s rights. Prompted by a conversation with children about the difference between art and craft, a spontaneous, multi-week, child-led exploration of this question through dialogue, artistic experimentation and research culminated in the quilt-making project. The project exemplifies how the right to express views, the right to play, and the right to participate in cultural and artistic life can be integrated into everyday learning for young children.

TREASURE MAP

Place matters. Cultural and linguistic factors are considered from Reggio Emilia that situate pedagogical practices at the local level, and will impact how early childhood education can be realized depending on the place, resources, and rights of children and their local context. Through exploring how the Reggio-inspired philosophy can inform the rights of children, we hope this book will contribute to positioning children’s rights as the global priority for our times and signal how these responsibilities can be realized in practice. In the age of globalization, early childhood education systems around the world are exposed to and influenced by multiple curriculum philosophies, theories, pedagogies, policies, and practices (Bautista et al., 2021; Li & Chen, 2023).

Glocalization occurs when global influences merge with local practices across different cultural contexts (Andrian et al., 2025; Kregel, 2021; Ødegaard, 2015; Yang et al., 2021; Yang & Li, 2022). As evidenced across the chapters in this book, the interpretation of the Reggio Emilia Approach is an example of how glocalization in early childhood education can be realized in practice (Li & Chen, 2023). The Reggio Emilia Approach has been embraced, experimented with, and adapted to varying degrees across a range of cultural contexts (Su & Edwards, 2016; Zhang et al., 2025). This publication and the other volume in this series entitled, *Reggio Emilia-Inspired Pedagogies of Listening and Inclusion: Advancing Children’s Rights*, provide a window into how the Reggio Emilia experience has inspired early child-

hood education and the experiences of young children in contexts across Canada, Italy, Ireland, India, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, Zambia, and the United States.

Each chapter highlights the Reggio Emilia Approach as a child-centered philosophy where the child has rights, is viewed as an active constructor of knowledge in a context where knowledge is socially constructed and involves multiple forms of knowing (Edwards et al., 2011; Rinaldi, 2012; Ring, 2018). While a range of Reggio-inspired philosophies, theories, pedagogies, policies and practices are shared in this publication, these cannot be equated with the Reggio Emilia Approach itself. As editors and authors, we are very clear that the Reggio Emilia Approach is the preserve and exclusive asset of Reggio Emilia's municipal preschools and infant-toddler centers. The Reggio Emilia Approach is rooted in a specific cultural, historical, social and political context that cannot be imposed on, or transferred in its entirety to another context. While experiences in this publication have all been influenced and inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach, they do not purport to replicate the approach, nor can they be equated with the approach itself. Rather the ideas represent an interpretation in a range of distinctive cultural, social, and political contexts that have their own unique history and identity (Nissinen et al., 2025; Varner et al., 2021).

The book is an invitation for you to journey into reflection on the variety of chapters written by authors from around the world. These authors seek to highlight the importance of embedding the principles of reciprocity, the protection of childhood as an important period and agency in teacher preparation practices that build teachers' competencies and places a premium value on teachers' professionalism. We trust that across the chapters, which are located in a robust theoretical framework comprised of empirical and philosophical strands in underrepresented contexts, professionals will be supported in their quest to craft a responsive inclusive pedagogy related to their own specific contexts (Landini & Colacino, 2023; Ring et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023; Ring & O'Sullivan, 2025).

While the approach at Reggio Emilia supports children up to the early years and more recently in its application to children in primary school, its principles resonate with the global rights-based agenda and have applicability for all children and young people in a variety of contexts (Gandini, 2011; Landini & Macy, 2025; Ring & O'Sullivan, 2025; UN, 1989; 2006; Macy et al., 2025). Specifically, the principles of adults as co-learners, authentic assessment, a view of childhood as an important period, the promotion of a rights-based approach to children's lives have the potential to contribute to the transformation of how children and young people experience childhood globally.

Maps assist us in discovering new places and ideas. We hope this book together with the other volume in this series: *Reggio Emilia-Inspired Pedagogies of Listening and Inclusion: Advancing Children's Rights* serve as compasses for readers to begin

a voyage into thinking about children's rights to education in the early years of their life and beyond. When you wander into each chapter, notice what authors share about orienting ideas into spaces for reflection. Determine a course for navigation that is uniquely your own. "*La vita e un lungo cammino, dove sei maestro e studente. Qualche volta insegna, ma ogni giorno impari.*" This Italian phrase translates into: "Life is a long journey where you are teacher and student. Sometimes you teach, but every day you learn." Like the many visionaries involved in the establishment of the "People's Nursery School" at Villa Cella near Reggio Emilia in the aftermath of the Second World War (Edwards et al., 2012), we invite you to travel through each chapter as though this book is a treasure map to discover new things about the rights of children on a voyage of discovery.

Marisa Galliano Macy

University of Wyoming, USA

Emer Ring

Mary Immaculate College, Ireland

Alessandra Landini

I.C. A. Manzoni of Reggio Emilia, Italy & University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy

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Chapter 1

“Two Wings of a Butterfly”: Promoting the Right to Play Through a Playful Approach to Learning in Global Contexts

Lisa Goddard

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-3997-6959>

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy

Maria Barbara Donnici

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-3886-1863>

Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy

Elisa Ferrari

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-6834-8878>

Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the experimentation of Reggio-inspired playful approaches to learning across diverse contexts. Rooted in the Reggio Emilia philosophy and reinterpreted through local practices and international collaborations, these approaches position play and playfulness as central to creativity, connection, and meaning-making. Learning is viewed as relational and joyful, where curiosity and passion drive development. Inspired by Carla Rinaldi’s image of play and learning as “the two wings of a butterfly,” the chapter honors her vision of education as a living dialogue among children, teachers, and communities. It argues that play is not only a pedagogical strategy but a fundamental right. Through examples from local and global projects, it makes visible how documentation, teacher-researcher

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inquiry, and the playfulness of adults nurture play as a participatory, ethical, and relational practice that regenerates education through motivation, passion, and a shared sense of empathy born from listening and co-construction.

INTRODUCTION

Since the first United Nations declarations concerning childhood, both education and play have been acknowledged as fundamental human rights. The 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child affirmed in its seventh principle that “The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation,” positioning play alongside education as central to the full development of the child (United Nations, 1959). This notion was later reaffirmed in Article 31 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which calls on governments to recognize every child’s right to rest, leisure, and play (United Nations, 1989). These declarations recognize play, not as a privilege or extracurricular pastime but as a condition of justice and equity in childhood.

Yet in recent decades, early childhood education has been shaped by increasing pressures of “schoolification,” the encroachment of formal schooling practices, standardized assessment, and prescriptive curricula into spaces once focused on holistic, play-based learning (Broström, 2017; Moss, 2015). In this context, reasserting the right to play takes on renewed urgency. Play is itself a form of knowledge-making that stokes children’s curiosity about the world they currently live in. Dewey (1938) argued that focusing solely on the future undermines meaningful learning. He believed that understanding and engaging fully with present experiences is what truly prepares individuals for what lies ahead. Learning, he wrote, must be driven by “the desire to go on learning,” cultivated through curiosity, motivation, and passion (p. 48). Play is a space that brings those dimensions together.

Malaguzzi and the educators of Reggio Emilia rejected the reduction of childhood to preparation for school or adulthood. They positioned children as full citizens with rights in the present, including the right to learn and express themselves through the “hundred languages,” to explore and inquire freely, and to encounter environments that respect and expand their imaginative capacities. In Reggio contexts, play is a primary mode through which children build relationships, investigate the world, and create meaning (Edwards et al., 2012). Reggio educators have long emphasized that play is entwined with democratic participation and knowledge production (Edwards et al., 2012; Moss, 2019). As Rinaldi (2006) argued, listening to children means taking their ideas, theories, and playful encounters seriously as contributions to a shared culture of learning. Documentation, project work, and the design of environments are pedagogical strategies that make visible the right to play by giving

Chapter 2

Close and Beyond Reggio Emilia: San Miniato and Children's Protagonism in Education

Aldo Fortunati

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-5319-2380>

La Bottega di Geppetto, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the enduring influence of Loris Malaguzzi's socio-constructivist pedagogy and its generative power in inspiring locally rooted yet original educational experiences, such as the San Miniato project. It examines Malaguzzi's vision of children as active, competent protagonists in their own learning, challenging traditional "funnel" models of education that suppress diversity. Through attention to documentation, reflection, and community involvement, pedagogy becomes a shared process of change engaging educators, families, and the local context. The San Miniato experience, while distinct from Reggio Emilia, demonstrates how Malaguzzi's ideas can foster innovative, community-based curricula centred on relationships, diversity, and the continuous co-construction of knowledge and identity.

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SAN MINIATO, THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S PROTAGONISM

The Long – and Unfinished – Road to the Affirmation of Children's Rights

A quote that aligns perfectly with the theme of this chapter's first section is one that Malaguzzi himself reported in a private correspondence, made public several years after his death: "*Reggio Emilia, January 3, 1994 – Dear Aldo, as you can see, life is an unfinished sketch always – shamelessly and wonderfully – fresh. A warm hug. Loris*" (L. Malaguzzi, personal communication. January 3, 1994).

To begin, as the title of this chapter suggests, the central theme of this contribution concerns highlighting the relationship between Malaguzzi's pedagogy and the educational experience developed in San Miniato, a Municipality located in the very heart of Tuscany and internationally renowned as a social community deeply committed to children's right to high-quality education¹.

In this regard, it is appropriate to recall some aspects that more generally concern, precisely as this volume seeks to explore, the theme of the affirmation of children's right to education as a global and current challenge (Rinaldi, 2022).

Remembering that more than 35 years have passed since the United Nations approved the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred to as the Convention), it can be useful to reflect upon some of the statements regarding children's rights in this text (United Nations, 1989).

Perhaps three words can help us understand the perspective outlined by the Convention itself and these words are also very relevant to the theme of this volume: participation, listening, education.

Let's start with the first one: "participation". It is not necessary to recall how the UN Committee, in monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, has repeatedly highlighted to Italy the need to create conditions for a better implementation of this right, noting the weakness of the actions carried out to date in this direction² (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019).

However, beyond these observations, it is worth considering here that a common misconception is to confuse the gradual acquisition of adult responsibilities with the necessity of respecting children's voices. These are distinct issues: the lack of legal rights, such as voting or working, does not diminish the relevance of a child's point of view. The relevance of respecting children's thought must be recognized as a fundamental right, independent of the transition to adulthood.

The fact is that often, in the end, granting spaces for participation becomes the pretense of anticipating the forms that correspond to the structure of democratic representative bodies. On the contrary, it would be far more interesting and useful to

Chapter 3

Children's Right to Ecological Thinking: The Reggio Emilia Approach in the Era of Environmental Crisis

Eloisa Di Rocco

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4263-1647>

Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy

ABSTRACT

The climate crisis is in children's speeches, and their concern is growing. As a science of relationships, ecology reminds us that on this planet humans are not a chosen species but intertwined with other species, in perpetual flux. Children have the right to perceive these other presences as possible encounters, rather than as dangers, and to feel part of a vibrant ecosystem that shapes them and that they can shape with responsibility. The pedagogy of listening, which the Reggio Emilia approach formulated in the 1990s, calls for a humble attitude towards the world. This chapter presents some research trajectories based on the pedagogical documentation of the Reggio Emilia schools and the Remida project, to prepare us, adults and children together, for a damaged world.

INTRODUCTION

The latest IPCC report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, highlights that children born in 2020 will have a higher probability of experiencing extreme weather events during their lifetime than ever before in history (2023, p. 7). As Save the Children points out in a more recent report, “In this context, ‘unprecedented’ is defined as exposure to climate extremes you would only have a 1 in 10.000 chance

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of experiencing during your lifetime in a world without human-induced climate change.” (2025, p. 6). These extreme events include heat waves, floods, tropical cyclones, droughts, wildfires, and crop losses.

In addition to catastrophic events, there is also climate migration, political instability, loss of biodiversity, and pollution. A recent article by Philip J. Landrigan et al. (2025) published in *The Lancet* reports on the impact that plastics and microplastics are having on the health of children, infants, and even fetuses.

Children are not unaware of this reality. The environmental crisis, in its various forms, is a topic of conversation among them, as noted in *Sfere di influenza: Un’analisi dei fattori che condizionano il benessere dei bambini nei paesi ricchi* (Spheres of influence: An analysis of factors affecting child well-being in wealthy countries¹), a UNICEF report that examined 41 countries in the industrialized world (2021, p. 52). Concern is growing among children and young people in many parts of the world (Sanson & Bellema, 2021), and this is affecting their well-being and their ability to face the future with optimism. This analysis is not surprising, considering that they are growing up in the midst of an emergency that will impact the rest of their lives.

While it is crucial to work to mitigate the environmental effects of climate change, the field of education must also consider the necessary learning required to face the intellectual and cognitive challenges that await the younger generations.

As philosopher Félix Guattari writes in *The Three Ecologies* (2005), it is not only the ecology linked to the protection of our ecosystem—environmental ecology—that matters, nor is it only social ecology (which investigates how cultural and economic behaviors, capitalism in particular, affect this emergency). We must also take into account the third ecology, the psychological one, concerned with how human beings form their knowledge, how we *think* about the crisis.

It is important to consider how the first two ecologies intertwine and influence the third, namely, ecological thinking.

The UNICEF report shows that children’s physical and psychological well-being comes mainly from family ties, but also from activities such as riding a bike and playing outdoors (2021, p. 23). However, engaging in these activities obviously depends on the nature of the territory, the available infrastructure (e.g., the presence of bike paths), and finally, on the ability of adults to see them as *possibilities*.

This chapter focuses on this third condition, arguing that ecological education is a child’s right that schools, families, and communities are called upon to fulfill, not so that children learn how to save the planet in the future, but for the sake of their psycho-physical development in the present.

Chapter 4

Fostering Children's Rights to Literacy Through the Reggio Emilia Approach

Pamela Beach

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4980-9447>

Queen's University, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on current research on language and early literacy development and instruction, offering a critical perspective on evidence-informed literacy practices within the Reggio Emilia classroom. It explores language and literacy development through the lens of social constructivist theory, emphasizing that children's development of language and literacy occurs through social interaction and collaborative knowledge-building activities. Practical examples from Reggio settings illustrate how educators can nurture early literacy in meaningful ways. By bridging theory and classroom practice, this chapter advocates for responsive literacy instruction that honours children's voices and experiences while at the same time fosters children's right to become literate members of our global community.

INTRODUCTION

Based on the fundamental principle that literacy is a human right, this chapter explores early literacy through a social constructivist lens, positioning children as active participants in the learning process (Gandini, 2012; Malaguzzi, 2012). Within this framework, literacy learning is not viewed as a passive endeavor, but one as

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something that emerges through relationships, dialogue, and purposeful engagement with materials and the environment. The Reggio Emilia approach places children's ideas, questions, and interactions as the centre of the learning experience. Building on this theoretical notion, this chapter provides an overview of the research in early literacy development and highlights practical, play-based experiences where early literacy skills are fostered through exploration, inquiry, and the arts. These multi-modal and integrated experiences offer rich contexts for children to engage with oral and written language in meaningful ways (Beach, 2025). Carefully designed, literacy-rich environments that support curiosity and communication enable children to experiment with symbols, storytelling, and mark making, all of which contribute to the development of foundational literacy skills. By aligning the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach with evidence-based literacy instruction, this chapter presents a model for early childhood educators committed to supporting the complex process of language and early literacy development across diverse and multilingual educational settings.

Before delving into the research on language and literacy development, this chapter will begin with a review of how the Reggio Emilia approach views children as active agents in their learning. This foundation will lead to a discussion on the essential role of play in early childhood education, followed by an overview of early literacy including the key components of literacy that should be embedded in every early learning program. This chapter will then explore how early literacy principles align with the Reggio Emilia philosophy, highlighting key elements of literacy learning within a Reggio environment. Finally, four classroom vignettes will be presented illustrating how developmentally appropriate practices in Reggio settings can foster growth in children's language and literacy skills.

CHILDREN AS ACTIVE AGENTS

The Reggio Emilia approach provides children with opportunities to be socially active in the construction and determination of their lives, and was developed based on the belief that all children are naturally curious, capable of constructing their own learning in an environment that invites them to collaborate with their peers and provides them with a sense of ownership and autonomy (Gandini, 2012; Malaguzzi, 2012). The idea that children are active citizens capable of constructing their own learning with their collaborative peers, stems from renowned researchers and philosophers in child development and learning: Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget. A common thread of Vygotsky, Dewey, and Piaget is the shared belief that children actively construct knowledge through interactions with their peers, teachers, and their environment (Bruner, 1997; Glassman, 2001). Vygotsky's

Chapter 5

An Absolute Possibility: The Reggio Emilia Approach in Diverse Settings in South Africa

Sarah Jane Browne

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-4718-5546>

*Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (AREA), South Africa & Reddam House Waterfall
Early Learning School, South Africa*

ABSTRACT

This chapter is a comprehensive overview of the potential of the Reggio Emilia approach in diverse settings in South Africa. It traces aspects of the historical legacy of apartheid on education and the ongoing inequalities affecting early childhood education. It highlights ongoing challenges such as limited resources, formalised teaching methods, and disparities related to access. The chapter presents the Reggio Emilia approach as a philosophy of education that focuses on children's rights, agency, creativity, and the significance of learning environments while emphasising the culture of the atelier and the role of the atelierista. Through various case studies of South African schools and communities, it illustrates the transformative potential of this approach, even in under-resourced settings. The chapter underscores the resonance between the Reggio Emilia philosophy and South Africa's aspirations for social justice, advocating for educational reform, and professional development. It acts as a call to action to ensure every child's right to a quality, creative education.

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Education Landscape

South Africa, a land filled with promise, beauty, and numerous possibilities, also faces challenges that can be seen as creating rich learning opportunities in various settings. Education in South Africa has been influenced by many factors, both past and present. South African society consists of various cultures, economic backgrounds, with 12 official languages. While early childhood education is currently a hot topic of discussion, historically, little has been done to improve it or ensure children's rights and access to it.

Historical Context

Many of these challenges can be traced back to apartheid, a system of racial segregation resulting in unequal education. The Nationalist Party implemented apartheid, creating deep educational disparities reinforced by racist policies. The Bantu Education Act of 1952 further entrenched inequalities, with the black majority receiving education designed to limit their potential and maintain their position within the working class. This impacted the content, quality, and access to education for Black people, entrenching a divide and fostering racial segregation (Ocampo, 2004).

During apartheid, various Departments of Education were segregated by race, resulting in reduced funding and significant inequalities for Bantu Education. Schools affiliated with churches had their funding withdrawn, affecting the quality of teachers. The government justified this withdrawal of funding as a necessary separation between Church and State.

Current Challenges in Early Education

This history often affects early education today, with teachers' personal history of schooling frequently resulting in an inappropriate, formal approach. Historically too, early childhood teachers have not been highly regarded and even today receive minimal pay. This impacts their economic stability, their access to transportation and financial resources.

Early childhood education is much needed and many children in under-resourced contexts lack access to these services. Early childhood settings are often the only places where children receive daily meals, leading to overcrowding and limited resources. Additionally, the number of children living in dire need on the streets poses great challenges in terms of access to education, care and safety.

Chapter 6

Children's Rights in Action at Acorn

Rosalba Bortolotti

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-1880-3255>

Acorn Collaborative, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of children's rights within early learning settings, emphasizing the image of the child as a capable, curious, and contributing citizen. Grounded in the principles of the Reggio Emilia philosophy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it examines how democratic participation, documentation, and inquiry-based learning cultivate environments where children's voices and ideas shape the work and projects. Drawing on examples from Acorn School in Toronto, Ontario, the chapter illustrates how everyday encounters with open-ended materials, community rituals, and shared projects become spaces for meaning-making, reflection, and co-construction of knowledge. Through these lived experiences, educators are invited to consider how pedagogy, ethics, and politics intertwine in fostering cultures of listening, belonging, and participation that honor children's rights as lived, relational, and transformative practices.

CHILDREN'S RIGHT IN ACTION AT ACORN SCHOOL

The Image of the Child as a Rights-Bearer

Truly realizing children's rights in education and society begins with a fundamental rethinking of childhood itself. For centuries, the concept of childhood has been far from static; it is a social and cultural construct, constantly evolving with

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philosophical thought, economic shifts, and societal values. The 20th century saw the rise of developmental psychology with figures like Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory (Piaget, 1952) emphasized children as active constructors of knowledge, moving through distinct stages, interacting with their environment to build understanding. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), however, pushed this further, asserting that learning is fundamentally a social process, deeply embedded in cultural contexts and mediated by language and interaction with "more knowledgeable others" (adults or more skilled peers). Both theorists, in their own ways, challenged the notion of a passive child, laying groundwork for a more dynamic understanding of child intelligence. Drawing from the Reggio Emilia philosophy, the central belief for a genuine rights-based approach to education is the "image of the child as competent, capable, relational, and a full citizen." This is not just a teaching preference or a romantic ideal; it is a deep stance that redefines what it means to be a child. It asserts that from birth, children are active constructors of knowledge, meaning-makers, and participants in their world, not just passive recipients. They arrive with a rich array of potentials, curiosities, and a drive to connect and communicate. This intrinsic capacity is the very source from which their rights naturally emerge. In vivid contrast to older views, which often defined children by what they lacked compared to adults, the image of the competent child champions their inherent potential and agency. The powerful words of Janusz Korczak, an advocate for children's rights, perfectly capture this perspective: "Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. They have a right to be treated with tenderness and respect and should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be." (Korczak, 1967) His emphasis on children as "people of today" is a clear call for immediate recognition of their present worth and inherent dignity, challenging the instrumental view that sees children only as future adults or future economic contributors. This is a foundational statement for understanding children as rights-bearers, not merely future ones.

INTRODUCTION TO ACORN SCHOOL

Acorn School was founded in 2004, born from a desire to reconceptualize early childhood education and care. From its earliest days, Acorn was envisioned as a living community — a place where relationships stood at the heart of all learning. The school's philosophy was grounded in the belief that children are strong, capable, and full of potential, and that educators, too, are researchers and co-learners in this shared journey. These ideas were deeply inspired by my encounters and ongoing research with the infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia,

Chapter 7

Moving Beyond Reggio Emilia's "Special Rights" to a Rights-Based Response for All Children in the Irish Context: Learning From the Reggio Emilia Experience

Emer Ring

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8459-8625>

Mary Immaculate College, Ireland

Lisha O'Sullivan

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-5713-9387>

Mary Immaculate College, Ireland

ABSTRACT

In Reggio Emilia, children typically referred to as 'children with disabilities or 'children with special needs' are described as 'children with special rights'. Propelled by a rights-based agenda, governments globally are grappling with the policy and practice demands of building inclusive education systems that each child can access, participate in and benefit from. The Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme in Ireland adopts the Reggio Emilia focus on the image of the child; the hundred languages of children; a pedagogy of listening and the environment as the third were among the key principles embedded in the programme.

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Drawing on an extensive evaluations of the programme, the authors will consider how the Reggio Emilia foci of the programme have been instrumental to the success and overall impact of the programme on the lives of children, teachers and families.

INTRODUCTION

A key principle of the Reggio Emilia approach is that children typically referred to as ‘children with disabilities or ‘children with special needs’ are described as “children with special rights” (Soncini, 2012, p.189). This is an important distinction and invokes the rights-based foundation on which the inclusive educational approach proposed by the infant-toddler centres (asili nido) and preschools (scuole dell’infanzia) of Reggio Emilia is built. Propelled by a rights-based agenda, governments globally are grappling with the policy and practice demands of building inclusive education systems that each child can access, participate in, benefit from and experience a sense of belonging (Ring, 2024). While each education system has unique social, political, economic, historical and cultural influences, the critical importance of prevention, early identification, assessment and stimulation of the young child together with teacher competency have been identified as intricately linked to effective inclusive education systems (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], 2025; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023).

In Ireland, the compulsory school-starting age is six, however, historically children can commence primary school at four years of age. Notably school-starting age has been increasing steadily over the past number of years with the overall proportion of four-year olds starting school reduced from 46.3% in 2002 to 16.9% in 2022 (Department of Education [DoE], 2023). One of the key factors contributing to this development is the introduction in 2010 of a universal free preschool year and its subsequent expansion in 2016 to two years (O’Sullivan & Ring, 2023). Cognisant of the contribution of prevention, early intervention and teacher professional learning to a competent early childhood system, in 2015, the Irish government launched a new programme of supports aimed at providing for the inclusion of children with ‘special rights’ (Ring & Breen, 2017). This initiative included a programme of teacher professional learning to support existing early childhood teachers in leading inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy for children in early childhood settings prior to the commencement of formal primary or elementary schooling.

The development of this programme, the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years [LINC] Programme is located in research on prevention, early intervention and inclusion (LINC Consortium, 2019; 2024: 2025a). All early childhood teachers

Chapter 8

Reimagining Education Through Participation, Dialogue, and Listening: Local Communities, Global Perspectives

Benedetta Melloni

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-6797-4467>

Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy

Elisa Ferrari

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-6834-8878>

Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy

Mara Davoli

Fondazione Reggio Children, Italy

Alfonso Trillicoso

Istituto Comprensivo “A. Manzoni”, Italy

ABSTRACT

Rooted in a local context yet carrying global significance, the chapter examines how the integration of formal and non-formal education can benefit children, families, and the community as a whole by transforming children's rights into everyday learning experiences. The chapter is based on Peace Between Cultures, an action research project that tackled cultural diversity and religious illiteracy, involving children, teachers, families, and local institutions in a peripheral area of Reggio Emilia. The chapter draws on the pedagogical framework of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA)

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and uses the project as a case study to explore how education can function as a democratic and relational process. It specifically examines how the school tackles significant challenges that hinder participation and foster isolation, and can establish itself as an 'educating community'—a shared space where children, educators, families, and community members engage in a collaborative learning process.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Tensions and conflicts between majority and minority populations, as well as among minority groups themselves, have troubled pluralistic societies for centuries, with policies serving as the main tool to address discrimination. Early examples date back to the Renaissance: the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which protected religious minorities in Germany; the Edict of Nantes (1598), which safeguarded Calvinists in France; and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which put an end to the Thirty Years' War and established peace among states and their minorities. Later, the Vienna Treaty (1815) granted civil rights and religious freedoms to minorities in the Netherlands, Belgium, the German Confederation, Switzerland, and Poland. In the last century, the 1919 post-World War I peace treaties required both old and new states to protect all citizens regardless of birth, nationality, language, race, or religion. After World War II, the newly founded United Nations [UN] adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] in 1948. Recognizing that peaceful and lasting coexistence cannot rely solely on political or economic arrangements, the UDHR (UN, 1948) promoted the “full development of the human personality” and “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (Article 26), linking rights and responsibilities between institutions and individuals to promote peaceful societies.

Declarations and recommendations have a non-binding nature; however, they represent a shared international consensus and a call for action (UNESCO, 2006). Indeed, many other instruments have been developed based on this principle of education and peaceful societies, such as the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples (1965), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981) (UNESCO, 2006). Among these, the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC] (UN, 1989) is particularly significant, as it prompted policymakers to view children not only as objects of protection but as subjects with rights.

The CRC states that children, who are capable of forming their own views, have “the right to express those views freely” in accordance with their age and maturity,

Chapter 9

Children's Right to Early Education: Bridging Reggio Emilia Philosophy With Global Educational Practices

Ashraf Alam

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6178-1187>

Alliance University, Bengaluru, India

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the Reggio Emilia philosophy as a compelling global model for realizing the child's right to early education, grounded in the UNCRC's principles of access, participation, and benefit. Tracing its post-World War II origins and theoretical lineage through constructivist, sociocultural, and critical pedagogical frameworks, the chapter demonstrates how Reggio operationalises rights in early childhood through democratic learning environments, inclusive practices, and child-led curricula. It critically examines global inequities in access, the participatory mechanisms embedded in Reggio pedagogy, and the multidimensional benefits, i.e., cognitive, social, and emotional, derived from such a rights-based approach. Drawing on comparative international implementations and innovations, it analyses the institutional challenges of embedding Reggio principles in diverse contexts. Finally, the chapter offers policy recommendations and envisions future directions for integrating Reggio-inspired practices into digital, cross-sectoral, and post-pandemic educational landscapes.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental human right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms in Article 28 every child's right to education, and in Article 29 that education should develop the child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential. It also guarantees in Article 12 the child's right to express views in matters affecting them and have those views respected. Together, these principles establish even the youngest learners as active subjects of rights, not passive objects, within education. Yet worldwide, the right to early education is far from realized. Severe inequities in access to early childhood care and education persist, due to poverty, conflict, disability, gender discrimination, and policy neglect. Globally, only about half of children aged 3 to 6 attend any form of pre-primary program, and in low-income countries the rate is barely 20% (versus around 80% in high-income countries). This amounts to roughly 350 million young children, i.e., about 40% of under-fives, having no access to organized early learning. The most excluded are often children with disabilities, girls in certain societies, and those in conflict zones or remote areas, who face compounding barriers to early education. Such disparities between the promise of universal rights and the reality on the ground highlight the need for models of early education that can bridge this gap.

Against this global backdrop, the Reggio Emilia approach has emerged as a compelling model for enacting the child's right to quality early education. Originating in the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy, this philosophy is distinctive in viewing the young child as a capable, rights-bearing person and the protagonist of their own learning experience (Hočevar, Šebart, & Štefanc, 2013). In Reggio-inspired schools, classrooms function as democratic communities where children's ideas drive long-term project work, teachers act as collaborators and researchers alongside children, and even the physical environment is designed to invite exploration and dialogue (Arseven, 2014; Soler & Miller, 2003). The Reggio Emilia approach demonstrates how access, participation, and meaningful learning outcomes can be realized together. It operationalises children's rights by ensuring not only access to schooling but also active participation in learning and holistic developmental benefits.

This chapter argues that the Reggio Emilia philosophy gives practical form to the child's right to early education as defined by international frameworks, offering a globally relevant pedagogical model that aligns with the rights to access, participation, and development. The discussion will first situate Reggio Emilia in its historical context. It will then examine how Reggio practices address inequities in access and elevate participation as a pedagogical right. Next, it will explore the outcomes and benefits associated with Reggio's holistic approach to early learning. The translation of Reggio principles into different contexts will then be considered and the discuss

Chapter 10

Other Worlds and Other Possibilities: Re-Envisioning Early Childhood and Children's Rights Through Collaboration of a Child's Global World of Community, School, and Family

Judith N. Levin

Independent Researcher, USA

Angela Vatalaro

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-1156-8571>

Independent Researcher, USA

Suzette Turner

University of Central Florida, USA

Kelcie Burke

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

Marisa Galliano Macy

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4676-9865>

University of Wyoming, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how the Reggio Emilia Approach can be re-envisioned through global collaboration among children's key systems of community, school,

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and family. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it emphasizes children's rights to participation, voice, and agency. Drawing from a decade of Reggio-inspired study abroad experiences with pre-service and in-service early childhood professionals, the authors propose a new educational partnership that unites parents and teachers through shared experiential learning in Reggio Emilia, Italy. This model seeks to bridge theory and practice, reduce power imbalances between home and school, and strengthen the child's global world by fostering collaborative, rights-based education that values the hundred languages of children.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the Reggio Emilia Approach (afterwards referred to as “the Approach”) through a global lens, considering how its principles intersect with the systems that shape a child's life within their community, school, and family. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977; 1979; 1986) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (United Nations [UN], 1989), we examine how collaborative partnerships within these systems can advance children's rights and foster their development as capable, creative global citizens. We reflect on how study abroad programs for pre-service teachers and study trips for parents and in-service professionals can be used as a mechanism to ensure children's rights are met while increasing the impact of Reggio-inspired programs in the United States.

In this chapter, we use the word *parent* to be inclusive of biological parents, legal guardians, and others who have primary, consistent contact with the child in their home life. We define *pre-service teachers* as university students enrolled in a teacher preparation program designed for early childhood and elementary educators. *In-service professionals* refers to practitioners serving children and families in community settings, including but not limited to practicing teachers, administrators, and early interventionists.

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS AND THE CHILD'S GLOBAL WORLD

Urie Bronfenbrenner was born in Moscow in 1917. As a child he experienced turmoil in his home country, immigrating to the U.S. at 6 years old. Bronfenbrenner actively witnessed the upheaval faced by children during the unrest and social change in Russia, which shaped his ideas about how a child's environment can influence child development (Guy-Evans, 2025). The ecological systems theory highlights

Chapter 11

Enacting Children's Rights Through Reggio Emilia-Inspired Practices In Türkiye: The Quilt-Making Project

Hatice Zeynep Inan

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6247-7857>

Sam Houston State University, USA

Melissa Dawn Gatlin

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0002-1656-5658>

Sam Houston State University, USA

Aysenur Gungor-Kircadag

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-5511-7999>

Naturel Forest Preschool and Primary School, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study presents the Quilt-Making Project carried out in a Reggio Emilia-inspired school (second grade; $n = 21$). It examines how children's rights, particularly participation, expression, collaboration, play, inquiry, and cultural life, were enacted through the project. Document analysis of pedagogical records including children's voices, classroom observations, and educator reflections traced the five-week process as students investigated the distinction between art and craft, explored materials, and collaborated with families and local artisans to produce a handmade quilt. Children's inquiry drove the project, shaping its direction and generating hands-on opportunities for interdisciplinary learning. Reggio Emilia principles provide a robust framework

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for actualizing children's rights, sustaining democratic participation and cultural heritage while achieving beyond standards. Ultimately, the project demonstrates how playful, culturally situated, and ecologically attuned environments transform curiosity into civic participation and embed children's rights into daily practice.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents how Reggio Emilia-inspired educators can implement a quilt making project that executes children's rights through interdisciplinary perspectives. It integrates multiple educational subjects (e.g., literacy, mathematics, science), ethics, ecology, material culture, and Nature Based Learning [NBL], enacting children's rights through sustained, multimodal investigation. The story illustrates a real-world application of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Children act as protagonists, while the curriculum is co-constructed through documentation, dialogue, and community encounters. The hundred languages are honored through making, storytelling, and research in the Quilt-Making Project.

The chapter emphasizes the importance of cultural interpretations and local adaptations in global contexts. In this story, quilting is treated as living heritage in Türkiye. Educators adapt quilting to the classroom's linguistic and cultural community while connecting this community to broader ecological and ethical questions. Children's daily experiences and questions drive the Quilt-Making Project. Learning standards are documented as outcomes, not starting points, demonstrating how inquiry-led projects meet requirements without narrowing practice. The following illustrates project-based learning rooted in children's lived experiences and inquiries.

On the way back from a school trip, one of the second-grade students made a comment about art: "You know what? Some people can't say 'sanat' [art]; they say 'zanat' [mispronunciation blending 'sanat' and 'zanaat'] instead." The teacher responded, "Maybe they mean 'zanaat' [craft]?" This prompted the children to ask, "What is craft?" We told them, "Let's explore this together when we get off the bus."

This small Turkish linguistic puzzle sparked a sustained inquiry at a Reggio Emilia-inspired, forest-based primary school in Türkiye and led to the launch of the Quilt-Making Project. As children explored quilts, which are part of their cultural heritage, and other textiles, their questions multiplied: What goes inside a quilt? Where did this fabric come from? Who grew the cotton? Eventually their inquiry took an ethical turn: Do sheep feel pain when they're sheared for their wool? Such questions lie at the heart of the Reggio Emilia approach, inquiry-rooted in children's strong instinct to explore and recognized as a right in the Reggio tradition (Malaguzzi, 1993; Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Infant-Toddler Centers and

About the Contributors

Marisa Galliano Macy is a full professor in the College of Education in the School of Teacher Education at the University of Wyoming. She holds the John P. Ellbogen Foundation Professorship of Early Childhood Education. Macy has more than 25 years of experience as an educator. She started her career as a special education teacher in Washington, and she has served in teaching and research roles at a number of higher education institutions, including the University of Oregon, Penn State University, University of Texas, El Paso, University of Central Florida, University of Nebraska Kearney where she held the Cille and Ron Williams endowed chair of Early Childhood Education, as well as community chair for the Buffett Early Childhood Institute. Macy, a Seattle native, earned a bachelor's degree in English at the University of Washington and a post baccalaureate in K–12 special education from St. Martin's College in Olympia, Washington. She received master's and doctorate degrees in special education with early childhood special education and early intervention from the University of Oregon. Macy completed the Certificate in Early Education Leadership from the Graduate School of Education at Harvard.

Emer Ring is Dean of Education, (Early Childhood and Teacher Education) at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick. Emer previously worked as a teacher of children in the early years and as teacher supporting neurodivergent children in mainstream provision. She has also worked in the Department of Education's Inspectorate in Ireland and as Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at MIC. Emer's research interests include education law; inclusion; early childhood; child voice; autism; play and pedagogy and she has researched and published widely in these areas.

Alessandra Landini is the Principal of the I.C. A. Manzoni in Reggio Emilia, with a PhD in Human Sciences, thesis in Physics Education from the Department of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, and a Master Degree in Organization and Management of Multicultural

School Institutions from Alma Mater, Bologna. Her scientific education research project studies a vertical science curriculum based on storytelling and the use of metaphor, between early childhood and secondary school. Adjunct Professor in Special Pedagogy at UNIMORE, as a General Didactics' expert, she provides integrative teaching activities at the university. She collaborates with the "Metaphor and Narrative in Science" research center. Other areas of research focus on the use of narrative formative evaluation for ECE, primary and secondary schools and on teacher training as a community of practice that cultivates educational co-responsibility by co-designing and integrating innovative didactic in school and museum settings. Since 2020, she has been studying a Vertical curriculum of Heritage and Citizenship K-13, which leads teachers and students to immerse themselves in the city's territory and its cultural heritage and School leaders to express diffused leadership by the school institution contributing to the creation, development and sustainability of learning democratic ecosystems. She is a Member of the Board of Directors of Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres, Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. In A.A. 2025-26 she is a Fulbrighter, SIR in residence, at Millersville University of Pennsylvania, USA.

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Ashraf Alam is an Assistant Professor at Alliance University, Bangalore. Dr. Ashraf has been distinguished as one of the World's Top 2% Scientists by Stanford University and Elsevier. His prolific academic output includes over sixty SCOPUS-indexed publications and more than one hundred conference presentations at esteemed national and international academic forums. He earned his Ph.D. in Education from the IIT Kharagpur. His research has been disseminated through elite academic platforms, including Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, Routledge, Sage, Emerald, and IEEE, and addresses a remarkably diverse array of topics including but not limited to pedagogical theories, educational administration, educational psychology, educational sociology, educational policy, technology-integrated learning, mathematics education, educational philosophy, educational technology, teacher education, and AI/ML in learning environments.

Pamela Beach is an Associate Professor of Language and Literacy at the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Canada. Pamela completed her MA in Child Study and Education at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto and her PhD in Developmental Psychology and Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Pamela has a decade of elementary classroom experience, teaching a range of grades and subject areas from pre-kindergarten to seventh grade. Her background as an early years and elementary

teacher has influenced her research which centres on the dissemination of research-informed literacy practices.

Rosalba Bortolotti is a highly experienced and dedicated pedagogist with over 30 years of experience in early childhood education, pedagogical research, and project work innovation. A past owner of a progressive preschool that functioned as a learning hub for educators, her school became known for its study tours, workshops, and retreats that introduced educators to reflective and inquiry-based practices. Rosalba is the author a tomato story in *Beautiful Stuff from Nature* (Gandini & Topal) and creator of the *Acorn Mini Books* (2004–2015; republished 2025), a curated collection documenting Acorn School's work and topic areas—ranging from children's encounters with materials, food, and nature to the evolving relationship among educators, families and community. As a part-time professor in the School of Early Childhood Education and chair of the York Region Nature Collaborative, Rosalba continues to advocate for pedagogies of care, sustainability, and the rights of children and educators. Her ongoing work includes consulting, mentoring, and leading professional learning across Canada and beyond through Acorn Collaborative (founder) Inspired by her visits to Reggio Emilia and long-standing inquiry into material thinking, Rosalba explores how educators and children can build deeper relationships with open-ended materials, food, and the natural world. Her work reflects a lifelong commitment to fostering democratic, ethical, and environmentally responsive education that honours children as capable citizens and co-researchers in learning.

Sarah Browne is an atelierista, presenter, and the social media curator for the Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (AREA). She is currently the resident atelierista at Reddam House Waterfall Early Learning School and coordinates the Reggio Emilia approach professional development at the school and is part of their Social Media Team. Sarah is passionate about the Reggio Emilia approach and promoting the rights of every child in every context. Sarah renamed her workspace, the Everywhere Atelier, a Reggio Emilia inspired laboratory of research, and aims to ensure that the culture of the atelier diffuses throughout the school and beyond like the fragrance of perfume.

Kelcie Burke is a doctoral student in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, specializing in Child Development and Early Childhood Education. A Nebraska native, she earned a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood and Family Advocacy with a minor in Special Education and a Master of Arts in Education in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Early Childhood from the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Burke's research

explores play-based development, teacher practices, and authentic assessment to support high-quality early childhood education. She serves as a graduate assistant and lead teacher at the Ruth Staples Child Development Laboratory, a nature and play based Reggio inspired program.

Mara Davoli worked as an atelierista in Reggio Emilia's early childhood system (1973–2007) and contributed to landmark exhibitions like *I cento linguaggi dei bambini*. Her extensive career includes collaborations with the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (2000–2007) and the Rosa Sensat Association in Barcelona (since 2008). Since 2012, she has served as a trainer for the Municipality of Correggio, focusing on educational design and expressive languages. A frequent contributor to specialized publications, she has co-curated several books, including *Reggio tutta: Una guida dei bambini alla città*, and for Edizioni Junior, *Ri-abitare i luoghi* and *L'atelier che rigenera*. She also edited the Italian edition of Carla Rinaldi's *In dialogo con Reggio Emilia*. She currently serves as a consultant for the Fondazione Reggio Children – Centro Loris Malaguzzi.

Eloisa Di Rocco has been working since 2012 for the Reggio Children Foundation as an atelierista and coordinator of Remida, the Creative Recycling Center. In 2025, she defended her doctoral thesis in Reggio Childhood Studies at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, entitled “Listening to matter: The Reggio Emilia Approach in the Anthropocene Era.” She conducts research on the dialogue between the Pedagogy of Listening, at the heart of the Reggio Emilia approach, and environmental studies, waste studies, and waste pedagogies from a post-human perspective.

Maria Barbara Donnici has been working with Fondazione Reggio Children since 2012, holding various roles over time. She currently coordinates the Play Explore Research (P.E.R.) project, a global platform promoting the value of play, exploration, and research as essential dimensions of learning and social change. P.E.R. advocates for the right to play and the right to quality education for all. She holds a degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures and a PhD in Reggio Childhood Studies. Her research investigates the transition from a transmissive educational model to one that emphasizes the playful dimension as a more effective and inclusive approach to teaching and learning. Maria Barbara has authored and co-authored articles and publications in Italy and abroad, and has presented her work at international conferences, contributing to scholarly discussions on innovative, research-based approaches to education.

Elisa Ferrari is a pedagoga with extensive experience in coordinating and supervising national and international educational projects at Fondazione Reggio

Children. Over the years, Elisa has gained solid expertise in co-design processes and engagement with public and private entities. Elisa's strengths include teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership. Her educational background includes a Master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences, emphasizing her commitment to pedagogical development. Additionally, Elisa is actively involved in educational research, with a focus on combating educational poverty and contributing to the advancement of innovative teaching and learning strategies in fragile non-formal contexts.

Aldo Fortunati is the President of BOTTEGA DI GEPPETTO – International Research and Documentation Center on Childhood Gloria Tognetti, (San Miniato, Pisa), a Professor at the University of Florence and the National Representative of Italy at World Forum Foundation (USA). From 1999 until his retirement in 2025, he served as the Director of the Documentation, Research, and Training Department at the Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence. He graduated in Philosophy at Sapienza University of Rome and Specialized in Developmental Psychology at the Institute of Education, University of London; he began his research activity at the National Research Council (CNR) in Rome. His biography combines research interests in child development with fieldwork for innovative education services and the coordination of policy monitoring in the Tuscany Region, on behalf of the Italian Government, and in Latin American countries. His bibliography includes books translated into English, Spanish, and Portuguese, and articles published in national and international journals.

Melissa Dawn Gatlin is an academic and researcher whose work emphasizes community engagement in early childhood education. Her interest in bridging academic learning with real-world issues promotes equity, empathy, and responsibility among future educators.

Lisa Goddard is a PhD Fellow in Reggio Childhood Studies at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy. Her research currently focuses on posthuman playful pedagogies for early childhood education in the ecological crisis. Lisa holds an MSc in Applied Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh, an MEd in Early Childhood Education from Boston University, and a BA in Language and Social Behavior from Brown University. Throughout her career, she has served as an early childhood educator in Reggio-inspired settings, teacher educator, curriculum developer and coach for Boston (USA) toddler teachers implementing a play-based approach, and pedagogista in Italy and the US, and now facilitates an international practitioner inquiry group to explore play and Reggio-inspired values in education in the Anthropocene.

Aysenur Gungor-Kircadag is the founder and school director of a Reggio Emilia-inspired Naturel Forest Preschool and Primary School in Türkiye. She brings a rich practice-based perspective as both a leader and facilitator in a learning community where the rights of the child are actively upheld and celebrated through daily pedagogical practice.

Hatice Zeynep Inan is a professor at Sam Houston State University and researcher in early childhood education specializing in the Reggio Emilia approach. Since 2002, her research has focused on how this philosophy supports inclusive, participatory, and rights-based practices in early childhood education. She has authored numerous scholarly publications on Reggio Emilia-inspired education. Dr. Inan has supervised theses and led research projects related to early childhood education while collaborating with and supporting early childhood and primary education institutions internationally.

Judith N. Levin recently retired from the University of Central Florida (UCF) as a Senior Lecturer in the Early Childhood Development and Education program where she served as program coordinator and taught undergraduate, masters, and doctoral courses. Levin earned her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education at the University of Florida, Master's degree in Counselor Education at UCF, and Doctorate degree in Child and Youth Studies at Nova Southeastern University. Her research includes a longitudinal study examining the influence of high-quality preschool experiences on children living in poverty. She has also worked on a variety of projects with Sesame Workshop, including upcoming seasons of Sesame Street. She continues her work presenting at professional conferences and providing training for early childhood professionals and parents. Levin has taken multiple groups of pre-service students on study abroad to Reggio Emilia, Italy and Finland and co-coordinated two trips with early childhood professionals to Reggio Emilia.

Benedetta Melloni is a PhD candidate in Reggio Childhood Studies at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, in partnership with the Reggio Children Foundation. Her research focuses on intercultural dialogue and inclusion in primary education, analyzing policies, educational practice, and perceptions across formal and non-formal settings. Her multidisciplinary career began in 2012 with roles at both the European Commission and the European Parliament in Brussels and Luxembourg. She subsequently spent five years at Engineering International Belgium and Engineering Ingegneria Informatica, where she managed projects and drafted R&D proposals focused on Smart Cities and Smart Communities. Since 2018, she has been with the Reggio Children Foundation, where she integrates her expertise in EU project design into her role as International Research Strategist.

Lisha O’Sullivan is Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies and Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland. Lisha is a qualified play therapist and lectures at undergraduate and post-graduate levels and engages in a wide range of research focused on the role of play in development, playful learning and teaching, inclusive education, and playful participatory research methods.

Alfonso Trillicoso is an elementary school teacher holding a degree in Modern Humanities with a focus on contemporary history. In addition to co-authoring articles on digital educational innovation, he currently teaches science at the “A. Bergonzi” State Elementary School in Reggio Emilia. At the “A. Manzoni” Comprehensive School, he serves as the Digital Learning Coordinator, leading training initiatives for both digital literacy and STEAM education. Notably, during the pandemic, he participated in an experimental heritage pedagogy project that involved conducting classes directly within the “A. Spallanzani” Civic Museum in Reggio Emilia.

Suzette Turner is a Childcare Director and Adjunct Instructor at the University of Central Florida. She earned her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Saint Louis University, specializing in Early Childhood Education. With more than 35 years of hands-on experience, Dr. Turner has led numerous initiatives focused on improving outcomes for young children. She has served as Principal Investigator on several federal and state childcare grants, supporting innovative programs for early learning. She often presents at conferences on Conscious Discipline, the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia and the transformative power of early education.

Angela Vatalaro received her B.S. (2008), M.Ed. (2010), and Ph.D. (2015) in Early Childhood Education from the University of Central Florida (UCF). She previously worked as an Associate in Research in the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at the University of South Florida where she conducted program evaluation and research on state, federal, and private foundation grants in the areas of home visitation, child welfare, systems of care, mental health and wellbeing of men and boys of color, and housing sustainability. She most recently served as a Visiting Lecturer at UCF in the Early Childhood Development and Education Program. She has participated in several study abroad trips, including: one to England; three to Reggio Emilia, Italy; and one to Finland.

Index

Symbols

3Hs education model 317, 335

A

Aldo Fortunati 35, 45

B

Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network 18

C

Carla Rinaldi 1, 3, 27, 67, 122, 184

Children's Protagonism 35, 36, 45, 53, 54

Children's Rights 3, 6, 8, 9, 29, 69, 85, 86,
89, 99, 102, 103, 111, 122, 123, 165,
166, 176, 178, 180, 181, 183, 184,
191, 199, 200, 201, 211, 246, 255,
261, 264, 265, 266, 277, 278, 279,
280, 283, 288, 298, 305, 307, 308,
311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317,
318, 319, 331, 333, 334, 336, 337,
338, 340, 342

climate change 59, 60, 63, 79, 83, 86, 198,
266, 279

cultural heritage 312, 313, 334, 338

D

Democratic Learning 245

democratic participation 2, 11, 26, 165,
180, 312, 319

Diverse Settings 111

E

Early Childhood 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 14, 28, 29,
30, 31, 32, 33, 40, 48, 53, 54, 55, 56,
57, 62, 66, 81, 82, 85, 86, 90, 91, 93,
98, 100, 105, 106, 107, 108, 111, 112,
113, 115, 117, 119, 147, 156, 166,

179, 180, 186, 188, 189, 191, 192,
193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 199, 200,
201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207,
208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 215,
216, 245, 246, 250, 251, 253, 255,
256, 260, 262, 263, 264, 265, 267,
268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274,
275, 277, 278, 281, 286, 289, 290,
300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306,
307, 309, 313, 315, 317, 336, 338,
339, 340, 342, 343

early childhood education 2, 4, 8, 9, 29,
30, 31, 32, 33, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 62,
81, 82, 90, 93, 98, 105, 106, 108, 111,
112, 115, 117, 119, 147, 166, 179, 180,
186, 189, 192, 193, 195, 196, 197,
199, 210, 211, 212, 246, 255, 267,
268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274,
275, 281, 300, 302, 303, 304, 307,
313, 315, 317, 336, 339, 340, 342, 343

early literacy 89, 90, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96,
97, 98, 99, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109

Early Years 8, 9, 28, 40, 62, 68, 93, 157,
187, 188, 189, 192, 194, 195, 196, 197,
201, 206, 207, 211, 212, 213, 214, 257,
258, 260, 261, 263, 266, 269, 270, 272,
274, 300, 301, 338, 339, 342

Educating Community 220, 223, 224, 229

educational partnership 176, 278, 293, 294,
295, 297, 298, 304

F

Family Participation 48, 53, 238

Fondazione Reggio Children 1, 4, 21, 29,
55, 59, 113, 219

H

hundred languages 2, 14, 19, 27, 29, 31,
43, 45, 53, 85, 91, 93, 100, 106, 107,
108, 127, 164, 174, 176, 177, 186,
187, 189, 197, 201, 202, 210, 212,
213, 214, 216, 242, 243, 248, 265,
268, 274, 278, 282, 283, 289, 302,
312, 314, 316, 334, 339, 340, 341, 342

I

Image of the Child 27, 32, 40, 165, 166, 167, 168, 174, 177, 178, 182, 186, 187, 189, 197, 199, 200, 201, 203, 210, 248, 252, 261, 334, 341
Implications For Practice 32, 156
Inclusive Education 187, 188, 212, 343
Inquiry-Based Learning 165
Intercultural Dialogue 221, 222, 238, 242

L

language development 93, 94, 98, 109
Learning Environments 65, 91, 111, 245, 275, 303, 315, 338
Lella Gandini 164, 181, 186, 214, 342
LINC Programme 189, 190, 192, 193, 194, 196, 197, 199, 201, 202, 203, 205, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211
literacy development 89, 90, 91, 92, 97, 98, 99, 100, 103, 107, 108
literacy skills 90, 92, 93, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 109
Loris Malaguzzi 10, 30, 31, 35, 41, 42, 51, 55, 70, 76, 91, 117, 118, 120, 121, 127, 152, 161, 174, 176, 179, 201, 247, 268, 272, 282, 288, 296

M

Manzoni Comprehensive School 223, 224, 232, 235, 240

N

nature-based learning 318, 340, 342
neurodivergent 192, 210, 257
Nursery 54

P

parent involvement 291, 292, 293, 300
Participatory Pedagogy 255
Pedagogy of Listening 21, 25, 32, 59, 66, 67, 69, 71, 79, 80, 85, 157, 184, 187, 189, 197, 201, 203, 204, 205, 210,

253, 270, 316, 342

Philosophy of Education 111, 118, 119, 156
Play Explore Research 11, 22, 29
Playfulness 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 25, 26, 28
Professional Development 15, 26, 81, 111, 114, 124, 156, 195, 196, 213, 214, 230, 234, 249, 262, 272, 281, 283, 289, 303

R

Reflective Practice 4, 19, 23, 197, 225, 238, 240, 260, 290, 313, 338
Reggio Children Foundation 84, 224
Reggio Emilia 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 14, 21, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 39, 51, 52, 53, 55, 59, 61, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 74, 76, 79, 80, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91, 93, 97, 99, 100, 102, 103, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 111, 117, 118, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 127, 128, 129, 131, 133, 134, 135, 136, 138, 141, 142, 145, 146, 147, 151, 152, 153, 155, 156, 157, 158, 160, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 176, 178, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 197, 199, 201, 202, 204, 207, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 219, 223, 224, 242, 243, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 277, 278, 282, 284, 286, 288, 289, 290, 291, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343
Reggio Emilia Approach 3, 10, 21, 26, 31, 59, 66, 67, 68, 69, 79, 80, 89, 90, 91, 93, 97, 105, 111, 117, 118, 120, 121, 124, 128, 131, 133, 134, 135, 136, 141, 142, 145, 146, 147, 151, 152, 153, 156, 157, 158, 160, 162, 163, 164, 178, 186, 188, 199, 201, 204, 207, 212, 215, 219, 242, 246, 247, 248,

252, 255, 258, 262, 264, 266, 267,
 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 274, 275,
 277, 278, 282, 284, 286, 291, 297,
 298, 301, 303, 304, 307, 312, 314,
 318, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343
 Remida 59, 70, 71, 73, 74, 76, 78, 79, 80,
 83, 152, 153, 288, 296, 297
 rights to literacy 89
 Right to Quality Education 62, 156, 224,
 226, 229, 230, 240

S

San Miniato 35, 36, 39, 41, 45, 46, 47, 48,
 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 56
 Schoolification 2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 19, 20, 38
 Space Design 262
 special education 211, 216, 267

study abroad 278, 283, 284, 285, 286, 288,
 289, 295, 297, 298, 300, 301, 302, 303,
 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309
 sustainability education 63, 65

T

teacher preparation 278, 284, 285
 the arts 6, 32, 90, 93, 97, 98, 100, 105,
 176, 221, 274
 The LEGO Foundation 3, 4, 11, 12, 21,
 32, 33

U

UNCRC 2, 3, 6, 7, 13, 174, 176, 190, 191,
 199, 200, 201, 205, 245, 253, 278, 279,
 280, 281, 293, 313, 314

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