

The Hundred Languages of Children Towards 'Well-Being' of our Youngest Learners- Lessons from the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education

Ms. Suhasini Kanwar

Doctoral Research Scholar, Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi.

The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education, by Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini and George Forman. Ablex Publishing Corporation, Norwood, New Jersey, 1993. Pages 411.

The Hundred Languages of Children is a book that attempts to explain what the Reggio Emilia approach to education is all about. Started in 1963, by Loris Malaguzzi, this approach was his response to a growing disagreement with church controlled, didactic approach to young children's learning and development. The book begins by describing the historical and political context, which gave rise to this pedagogy and explains how one town - that of Reggio Emilia, came together to raise and educate its children. The book explains the 'hundred languages of children' which is a metaphor for the various ways in which children learn and express their learning, and voices concern over school's inability to identify and cater to these differences.

Rooted in the social constructivist philosophy, the book details the approach towards helping children, from 0-6 years, make meaning of the world around them. It elaborates with the help of examples, how children learn best when they are left to themselves, to discuss with each other and choose what they want to learn and how. This is done by way of self-composed 'projects' which children as young as 3 years of age conceptualize and execute. As a reader of the book, one could be skeptical of this, but I had the opportunity to visit

the town of Reggio Emilia in Italy to learn about their approach and observe their classrooms in April 2016. Much to my amazement, I witnessed little children engage in dialogue, not just communication, deciding, arguing even convincing each other about various topics in a project. Not just that, I saw them construct meaning for themselves with little or no help from the *pedagogista*, their teachers. Student collaboration, community involvement, student autonomy in terms of choice and pacing are some of the tenets that the book elaborates.

While so many facets of the approach, written about in the book, need to be understood and reflected upon, one tenet that particularly struck a chord with me and which I shall discuss in detail in this article, is the focus of the Reggio Emilia approach on creating 'safe' spaces for young children, to scaffold learning. Throughout the book, the idea of creating caring and safe environments comes up repeatedly. Environments where little children feel physically and emotionally safeguarded are considered caring and safe spaces. The book explains how establishing a sense of well-being, helps the children take responsibility for their learning and engagement and subsequently leads to not just self-directed learning but also good behavior.

This strong commitment to children's safety and well-being comes from a 'rights' based approach to education. Sample this-



Children have the right to have friends, otherwise they do not grow too well.

Children have the right to live in peace.

To live in peace means to be well, to live together, to live with things that interest us, to have friend, to think about flying.

If a child does not know, she has the right to make mistakes. It works because after she sees the problem and the mistakes she made, then she knows.

(The Hundred Languages of Children, page 135)

The above statements give an insight into how students' well-being and care is manifested well beyond physical spaces and is rooted in the approach's ideology. Care as a concept extends to the smallest of activities in school. Be it making friends, the freedom to argue with them, the choice to make mistakes or the right to refuse to do work on a particular day, everything is legitimate. All these are seen as critical to creating caring environments, which in turn is considered the crucible for learning.

The book elaborates how the feeling of being valued is necessary for children to learn. Children, especially young children, are very sensitive and first and foremost need a sense of security to be able to immerse themselves in any construction of knowledge. Safety and care create a supportive environment in learning which involves 'partnering' with children rather than judging or evaluating them against set norms.

Children must feel that the whole school, including the space, materials and projects, values and sustains their interaction and communication (Rinaldi, 1990).

(The Hundred Languages of Children, page 137)

Infact, the book goes one step ahead in advocating choice as a pre requisite for learning and advocates giving all children the freedom to choose what they want to study and how to study and even for how much time. In the Reggio schools, the teachers know how to listen to children, how to allow them to take initiative, and yet how to guide them in productive ways. There is no race to achieve pre-determined standards and yet the dedication of the teachers, parents and most importantly the children ensures that work of quality will result.

What is it then that makes the Reggio approach so effective? How are such young children able to take charge of their learning? It is through the 'caring' environment being provided to the children.

So, how can we show the children that we care? The book elaborates different elements which I have clubbed under three broad areas:

- Physical Spaces
- Time
- Documentation of work

Physical Spaces as an element of safety and care

The book elaborates how physical spaces are considered a significant educational tool and a lot of time is spent in planning them. There are no classrooms and children are free to walk in and out of the many rooms. They pick their room based on the activity they would be conducting. There is no fixed seating either. Large windows, pleasing furnishings, green plants and open kitchens all contribute to a sense of serenity and discovery. An 'Atelier' or open space where children explore with clay, paint, markers etc is a sort of art studio. Children have access to all sorts of materials and are free to sit on chairs, rugs – whatever they choose. Even the ceilings are not spared and are used to display different types of aerial sculptures. Students' work is incorporated in classrooms and hallways in the form of large dramatic displays and this shows the children that the adults around them,



take their ideas seriously. There are no cartoons or printed charts on the walls, instead an effort is made to draw attention to objects from their daily routine. Like the display of toothbrushes or the frequent use of mirrors. All Reggio Emilia schools have large play grounds since they feel it is essential for children to spend time to connect with nature.

Spaces are seen as 'containers' which house interaction, exploration and learning. Space is also seen as having educational "content" (Filippini, 1990, cited in *The Hundred Languages of Children*, p. 138). Physical space for learning is not limited to the four walls of the school building. Rather the children are regularly taken to visit and explore the neighbourhood and the community. This makes space a very fluid concept. Spaces are organised such that they themselves facilitate learning. In fact, the environment is considered the 'third teacher' (the Reggio classroom has two teachers otherwise). Like the two human teachers, the environment is also supposed to be flexible and have the ability to incorporate frequent modifications by the children. Therefore, physical spaces are not static. Rather they scaffold student learning by providing opportunities for different activities and promoting choices. All this contributes to a sense of well-being and security in children. Children feel respected and acknowledged. When children feel acknowledged they learn better. While we are always mindful about the aesthetics and safety requirements of the physical space in our schools, this book highlights the role of the physical space as a learning aid.

Time as a concept for care.

The book also talks about the environment as a living, changing system. In a Reggio school, one can see (and having visited them, I can vouch for this) a connection between space and time. Physical spaces like the classroom are arranged differently everyday. This helps the children understand that nothing is static and spaces change

with time and context.

Time is also presented as something we organise, rather than chase. There is no hurry and students are not forced to complete tasks in a certain time frame. Rather all the projects they engage in, are long term, timelines of which they decide by themselves. This unhurried sense of pace, helps children feel safe and comfortable to engage authentically in what they are learning. Moreover, working at their own pace boosts little children's confidence and self-esteem, while rigid time and structure based systems inadvertently foster a sense of inadequacy in children.

Another facet of time is that the same teacher remains with the children for three years. She therefore understands the children very well. This also adds to a sense of comfort and familiarity in the minds of the children. The relationships children forge are trustworthy, genuine and long term. Also of importance is the fact that the Reggio schools are open from 9 am to 4 pm, and therefore, children eat, sleep and play –all in the school premises. So the school is not seen as different from home, or as a formal institution rather it is seen as an extension of home breaking down physical spatial barriers to learning.

Despite their best intent, teachers in our pre-schools struggle with managing time. While Indian pre-schools' format may not allow the same working hours, could we consider possibilities such as moving a teacher, with her class, to the next level? Could we attempt to let children decide their timelines for themselves? This would require a fine balancing act.

Documentation of students' work as demonstrators of care

The book suggests how to make a child feel ownership for school. A tremendous quantity of the children's work is exhibited all around the school. It's almost like the children have designed their schools. They choose what they want to make. Then they choose where and how to display it.



Displays include students' work samples, photographs documenting the process of learning, description of activities, knowledge constructed etc. When a child sees his/her work displayed, he/she begins to identify with the space. When children begin to identify with and love the space they work in, they look forward to spending their time there. They look forward to doing things there. And that is half the battle won. Doesn't learning begin with motivated, engaged children?

Displays serve not just an aesthetic purpose, but give the children a sense of belonging. They also serve as records of the process of learning and development. Records which parents, teachers and children refer to, time and again, to plan further. Significantly these records help the teacher reflect on the entire process of learning and also throw up professional development needs. The Reggio schools demonstrate how documentation doesn't have to be a meaningless and tiresome activity for the teacher, rather the children and teacher can get together to document their learning journeys. And the process can be enriching for students, parents and teachers alike.

Key Takeaways-

The book charms a reader by suggesting simple practices that positively impact the well-being and learning of young children. To summarise the points discussed in this article-

- Children have the right to be happy. Happy children will learn better and therefore it is our responsibility as teachers to create an environment that supports children's happiness.
- Environments in which children feel physically and emotionally safe, support their sense of well-being and bring happiness.
- Physical spaces can also lend themselves to flexibility and learning. Using a little bit of imagination, a teacher can transform the classroom that intimidates, to a

welcoming space that provides a context for learning.

- Every small gesture of the teacher, which may seem insignificant to the adult mind can potentially contribute to establishing emotional well-being in children. Some gestures like displaying children's work, asking and taking their opinion into consideration, giving them the freedom to make choices in the classroom- go a long way in establishing a relationship of mutual trust and respect.

Conclusion:

The Hundred Languages of Children explains how schools are stifling students' creativity and expression by not recognising the plurality of their expression or the 'hundred' languages of children. The book talks about how the Reggio Emilia approach is testimonial to the fact that all children need is a safe, healthy, loving and nurturing environment and the rest of the 'learning' the children can take charge of by themselves.

The Hundred Languages of Children is a lovely read. Compiled as an anthology of interviews and discussions with teachers and other members of the Reggio Emilia Approach fraternity, it gives insights into many critical components of effective early childhood teaching- learning. I have just elaborated one of the many elements and would urge readers to spend time and read the entire book.

References

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