Reggio Emilia & Eco-Literacy

My purpose:
As part of this elective topic (EDUC4833), in my final year of my Master of Teaching R-7 at Flinders University, I set out to expand my knowledge of the Reggio Emilia approach and how it assists in the development of students understanding in Eco-Literacy. I spent 10 days, once a week on a Thursday, supporting and observing a class teacher who had temporarily taken the role of Eco-Literacy teacher at Galilee Catholic Learning Community. I also spoke to teachers and researched via books, articles and websites. The school follows the Reggio Emilia approach and has a strong focus on play-based learning. The Eco-Literacy teacher spent the morning with her own class. She then took 3 lessons after recess as the Eco-Literacy teacher. She taught Eco-Literacy in the 3, year 1/2 classes. Additionally, I developed a series of small inquiries for students each morning in the year 1/2 class. I set out to build understanding around the teachers’ role in students’ inquiry and explore ways to engage students in independent inquiry.

My roles included:
- Collaborating with teachers, students, parents and school staff in the development of inquiry based learning experiences.
- Supporting the teacher by documenting the process of each lesson. Recorded students’ responses to questions and their comments, Supported students in their learning.
- Developing a series of small inquiries for year 1/2 students each morning. I documented student learning and responses, reflected on students’ learning and planned and adjusted the inquiries.
- Speaking to teachers and researching Reggio Emilia and Eco-Literacy via books, articles and websites.

What is Reggio Emilia?
‘The Reggio Emilia approach produces for the adults, but above all for the children, a feeling of belonging in a world that is alive, welcoming and authentic (Gestwicki, 2000).’ The Reggio Emilia approach is based around a set of fundamental values about how students learn. Below are the theoretical influences and the key values that underpin Reggio Emilia schools.

The theoretical influences of Reggio Emilia:
- Piaget – how the individual constructs knowledge
- Vygotsky – How children co-construct knowledge
- Dewey – Children learn through and in relation to living

The key values of Reggio Emilia are:
- The child as an active participant in learning
  Reggio Emilia conceptualizes the ‘image of the child’. ‘Children are rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent (Institute, 2013).’ Students are encouraged to interact with their environment and supported to follow their interests.
- The significance of environment
  ‘Environments need to motivate, empower and inspire, children to interact and there-by, learn (Institute, 2013).’ The environment is seen as the ‘third teacher’ in a Reggio school. Reggio Emilia schools are carefully designed to express beauty and facilitate the social constructions of understanding. Children are encouraged to explore learning in a hands-on way. Student’s works in progress document the life within the space.
Collaboration in the process of learning

Working together is viewed as a key element to student learning. Students co-construct knowledge. Teachers work together in planning and collaborate with students to build meaningful, student-centred curriculum. Collaboration with parents and wider community is fostered. ‘As educators, we need to constantly develop and reflect the relationships that we have with family and the community (Institute, 2013).’

Making learning visible

Transparency through light that infuses the space is created in a Reggio school. This transparency is also evident metaphorically. The openness of ideas and theories are encouraged. Information and student learning is made available through displays in the classrooms and around the school. ‘The documentation process provides a wonderful way for children, families and teachers to contribute to and revisit learning (Institute, 2013).’ (Garrett, 2013) (Gestwicki, 2000)

What is Eco-Literacy?

‘Being eco-literate...means understanding how eco systems are organized and using these principles to live by (Peacock, 2004).’

What did learning in Eco-Literacy look like at Galilee; a Reggio Emilia school, in year 1/2 classrooms?

At Galilee in the year 1/2 Eco-Literacy lessons, students were encouraged to interact with their environment. They were supported in the development of understanding around ‘balance’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘bio-diversity’. Students discovered the importance of interconnectedness and that all things affect each other. Students learnt how to make informed choices about their interactions with, and in development of their school environment. Students explored collaboratively and constructively as citizens, taking action in their school, making positive changes.

The Eco-Literacy teacher worked with class teachers to develop the term plan. The lessons integrated learning in History, Geography, Science, Design and Religion. Throughout the term, students undertook an inquiry project. They worked collaboratively to develop a plan for the entrance to the school. Students were guided by three principles. The principles form the basis of Galilee as a place that is:

- Respectful
- Constructive
- Welcoming

From classroom experience at Galilee, what elements of the Reggio Emilia approach assisted in development of understanding in Eco-Literacy in the year 1/2 classrooms?

From my experience working alongside the Eco-Literacy teacher at Galilee, I found that key elements of the Reggio Emilia approach were deeply embedded into the school culture; contributing to the learning students experienced in Eco-Literacy. The school had a strong focus on environment; providing many opportunities for students to not only ‘be’ in the environment, but to collaboratively construct and maintain the school spaces. At lunch and recess, (outside learning time), students were free to climb, construct cubbies and create outside. Green spaces were provided as a means to developing enriched learning experiences (Johnson, 2013).
Based on my time in the Eco-Literacy classrooms, the following key Reggio Emilia values underpinned students learning:

**The child as an active participant in learning**

I observed students constructing their own learning throughout the inquiry process which worked cyclically.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 2: The diagram above depicts the inquiry process.**

The lessons were often structured in a way, similar to the diagram above. However, in some lessons, only part of the cycle was used. Below is an excerpt of the documentation I took as part of my research. It shows the process of one of the lessons. Students began with reflection then moved on to a question. Discussion followed, and although not recorded here, the next lesson involved collaborative construction:

**Week 7, Term 3**

We reflected on the fact that peaceful was a word that many of us had used to describe the kind of garden we want for the front of the school. We asked ourselves this question:

**What does peaceful look like, sound like and feel like?**

**Peaceful looks like:**
Mr. B’s Homeroom
M - ‘It looks like beautiful stuff.’
C - ‘People relaxed, people sitting nicely.’
Mrs. G's Home room:
J - 'It is quiet and calm, no-one is talking.'
T - 'Butterflies and flowers.'

Peaceful sounds like:
Mrs. C's Homeroom:
C - 'Quiet and silent.'

Mr. B's Homeroom:
R - 'Quiet.'
A - 'Silent.'
J - 'Leaves blowing on trees.'
C - 'Birds singing.'

Mrs. G's Homeroom:
F - 'No talking, relaxing.'
M - 'Calm, sitting by yourself, quiet.'
L - 'If you are doing nothing, reading the newspaper quietly.'

Peaceful feels like:
Mr. B's Homeroom:
N - 'Calming.'
A - 'Really good and calming and feels really soft.'
H - 'It feels really relaxed.'

Mrs. G's Homeroom:
L - 'It feels like peaceful in your heart.'
J - 'It's calm.'
T - 'Calming.'

The documentation of students' comments and questions played an important role in the direction of the lessons. In this way, students' learning was ensured to be connected and meaningful. With teachers' careful observation, documentation and reflection, students were able to be key players in the direction and richness of their learning.

The Environment as a third teacher

Learning at Galilee in Eco-Literacy lessons involved students interacting with their environment, in this case, within the design and construction of outdoor spaces. Students explored in a hands-on manner. Learning was 'real-world'. Opportunities were given for students to reflect on changes that had occurred within the space and encouraged to experience its current state in all its elements. Students made connections between 'environment' and 'feeling' and used the following three key principles as a focus to maintain that their design would contribute to the space being: respectful, constructive and welcoming. Students developed an understanding of 'custodianship' of the land, within the local context of their school. Students were supported in the development of knowledge around ecological and sustainable design. Students learnt that native creatures need native plants to survive (Dymant, 2010) (Gestwicki, 2000) (Johnson, 2013).
Making learning visible

The process of inquiry throughout the landscape design project, involved my documenting students learning each lesson. Students’ comments acted as evidence of learning and were used as a basis to form the direction for the next lesson; learning was developed in a meaningful way. ‘Validating the children’s work and supporting the child to go deeper into their perception of the world is the most important part of the process (Garrett, 2013). ’ The documents, including photos and quotes from students, were displayed in a large book for parents and visitors at the entrance to the classroom. In the final week of the term, the completed designs and models were displayed along with students’ quotes in the foyer. The transparent nature of learning allowed for students to develop an awareness of themselves as learners. By displaying students’ comments, individuals were celebrated. Parents were also invited to engage with their child’s learning (Gestwicki, 2000) (Garrett, 2013).

Working collaboratively in the process of learning

Working collaboratively is a key element of the Reggio Emilia approach. Students worked collaboratively in every Eco-Literacy lesson. Students would ‘think, pair and share’ and worked in small groups to construct their designs. Teachers collaborated with teachers, and teachers collaborated with students to plan and construct learning in Eco-Literacy. Students worked as a community of learners, participating together to co-create their landscape designs.
In summary:

From research and hands-on experience at Galilee, a Reggio Emilia school, I discovered there were strong links that worked together to create engaged learning experiences for year 1/2 students in Eco-Literacy. The following key values of the Reggio Emilia approach contributed to learning in Eco-Literacy:

- The child as an active participant in learning
- The Environment as a third teacher
- Making learning visible
- Working collaboratively in the process of learning

The strong school ethos also contributed to the learning experienced by students. The following three guiding principles worked simultaneously with the Reggio values in students learning. Students were guided towards the creation of designs that would make the space:

- Respectful
- Constructive
- Welcoming

With these elements working together in Eco-Literacy lessons, students developed understanding around:

- Ecology, Eco-systems and Biodiversity
- Balance
- History and our effect on the future
- Design principles and methods
- Native plants and creatures
- Care for country, Citizenship and Collaboration

What have I come away from this experience with?

I have come away with a broadened understanding of the Reggio Emilia approach in a primary school setting. I understand more about how a school can integrate their philosophy and guiding ethos into student learning. I can see the benefits of a collaborative learning community, not just for students but for teachers and for parents. I can see how the Reggio approach links directly to learning through the environment, and in particular within Eco-Literacy lessons. I can see how the inquiry process can support student learning in a way that is inclusive, constructive, connected and meaningful. Through my independent mini inquiries for students in the mornings, I developed an awareness of the teachers’ role in the inquiry process. I explored questioning techniques and experimented with different methods of inspiring independent investigation. I learnt the importance of
documentation in a Reggio Emilia school and the role it plays in planning for learning and assessment. One of the most beneficial aspects of this topic has been that I have experienced learning in a new way. By undertaking research in a school as well as researching via books, articles and websites, I have been able to experience rich and connected learning. I have been able to actively explore through meaningful inquiry. This style of learning has been enjoyable and I will seek to continue to develop in this way as I begin my career as a teacher next year. My time at Galilee has been extremely valuable, I am continuing as a volunteer, supporting and observing in the Eco-Literacy classrooms for students in years 3 and 4 and providing morning inquiries on a weekly basis.

Bibliography


