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# Inclusive bilingual early years education by means of the Reggio Emilia Approach

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In diverse classrooms, bilingual early years education demands an inclusive approach for effective language acquisition. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, all children are viewed to be genuine and unique with individual ways and special rights. This paper aims to identify the aspects of the Reggio Emilia Approach that supports inclusive education. The research was conducted in a mixed-age group within a bilingual setting located in Budapest. Different qualitative research methods were used as data sources, including document analysis, participant observation, and unstructured interviews. The data analysis revealed a broader concept of inclusion in the setting. Through the project-based and experience-based learning fostered by an emergent curriculum, children can discover the world at their own pace. Children can work in micro and macro groups on meaning-making and understanding in activities tailored to their individual needs. The teachers scaffold their learning as facilitators supporting independence, cooperation, and peer-assistance while emphasising community-based learning. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, diversity is celebrated, and each child can be connected to differently. By filling the environment with variables, teachers allow for the inclusion of all children into activities, problems, and thinking.

*Keywords:* inclusive education, early childhood education, Reggio Emilia Approach, bilingual education

## Introduction

Scaffolding and enhancing early years foreign language acquisition is a task that is embedded in the continuous process of supporting the child's holistic development. Due to broad differences in language knowledge, this process demands the constant differentiation of teaching methods even within a general heterogeneous classroom. Diversity is not a problem but rather an opportunity in education. When it comes to a diverse classroom that includes children of different ages or special needs, an equal and inclusive approach is a must.

This paper is about the Reggio Emilia Approach, which is, in itself, an inclusive approach to early years education. In his poem, *The Hundred Languages*, the creator of the Reggio Emilia Approach, Loris Malaguzzi, talks of the way children are creative and active in building their knowledge and how they understand the world not only as it is told but also in one hundred different ways, through all their combined senses and with all their individual personalities and ideas as



factors, genuine to all (Edwards et al., 2012). This is the basis for their approach to children and to education itself. In the Reggio Emilia Approach what they call children with special rights are viewed to be inherently part of the heterogeneous group that is our world.

All education in the Reggio Emilia Approach is based on the idea of the competent child, meaning that each child is capable of so much more than they are frequently given credit for. The focus of education is not only on the outcome but also on the progress itself, and the ways of learning, individual to all. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator in learning and a supporter throughout the progress. S/he sets the stage for the children to encounter cognitive conflicts, then s/he supports them in their struggle to overcome these challenges. This approach enables them to gain their own experiences, connect with others in cooperation, and enhance their thinking and communicate what thoughts and ideas were provoked through the process.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Inclusive education through project- and experience-based learning***

Project-based learning, ‘during which students select, plan, investigate and produce a product, presentation or performance that answers a real-world question or responds to an authentic challenge’ (Holm, 2011, p. 1) is not a new learning method. Project-based learning was already used at the beginning of the 20th century by William H. Kilpatrick (Holm, 2011) in American education, and also reform pedagogies in Europe placed a great emphasis on projects, such as those employed by Célestine Freinet, whose classroom looked like a small workshop for children where thought was stimulated through actual handiwork (Mogyorósi & Virág, 2015). Throughout the 20th century, projects have been used in higher education. In the last few decades, this method has also moved into the pre-school and elementary school niches as well. It is a multidimensional education method based on the constructivist learning theory (Nahalka, 2013), which uses more participant involvement, thus resulting in more participant motivation. This technique involves a real-life problem or situation that provides the origin for research in different fields. Children are not taught in a frontal approach, wherein information is passed onto them and demonstrated using objects for the learning to happen. Rather, children are presented with difficulties that they have to understand, organise, communicate, and solve in a process that allows them to gain knowledge that would have otherwise been demonstrated to them. Thus, they struggle through cognitive conflicts and gain knowledge about the way in which they learn.

The teacher changes from a giver of knowledge to an enabler of self-growth and understanding. Children follow a process during which they observe, plan, hypothesize, experiment, and conclude about a given topic. Thus, children have the opportunity to learn self-sufficiency, critical thinking, communication, cooperation, problem-solving, compromise, and many more skills that will better equip them for the challenges they will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Having the

time and space to experience and solve problems resulting from the experience connected to this memory, children are better able to retain information.

Empirical studies found project-based learning to be successful in promoting more growth in language and concept development than traditional instruction (Ross & Lowther, 2003; Beneke & Otrrosky, 2009; Aral et al., 2010; Holm, 2011, etc.). Research has likewise proven the effectiveness of project-based learning specifically in early childhood (Beneke & Otrrosky, 2009). Since one of its most important features is student-centeredness, in which students define, choose and carry out their projects (Thomas, 2000), many school reform efforts utilise it as their central methodology (Ravitz, 2010). Project-based learning also perfectly fits the inclusive approach. When children drive their own learning based on their environment experiences, the constructive process unfolds in the right pace that is the best for the individual child. Beyond the positive effects on children's social and academic learning and improved motivation, the participation and learning of diverse learners is facilitated. A great amount of empirical data claims the positive effect of project-based learning in developing social competencies, a key factor in the inclusion of children with disabilities. When playing and working together in joint activities with their typically developing peers, children with special needs increase their social and play participation (Walker & Berthelsen, 2008). Professionals and even parents believe that peer interaction in inclusive early childhood settings results in a positive developmental change in their child's social skills, communication, and behaviour (Blackmore et al., 2016). Inclusive education is crucial for each member of a heterogeneous classroom since overcoming biases and learning critical consciousness is a key issue already in early childhood education (Hawkins, 2014).

### ***Bilingual institutional education***

Strong forms of bilingual education mainly target the language majority and its aim is bilingualism or biliteracy (Baker, 2006). Research of bilingualism shows no evidence for harmful effects due to bilingual education while much evidence exists regarding its benefits (Byalystok, 2018). The literature claims, among other benefits, that bilinguals have higher cognitive skills than monolinguals (Dolean, 2015), and their grey matter density from the inferior parietal lobe is higher (Mechelli et al., 2004). Compared with monolinguals, they outperform on attention tests and have better inhibitory control for ignoring perceptual information (Byalystok & Martin, 2004). They also have an improved understanding of communication needs (Genesse et al., 1975). Language immersion children were found to respond to the listener's needs in a much more differentiated way than control group children, presumably as a consequence of their more extensive experience of facing difficulties in communication (Kovács & Trentinné Benkő, 2014).

In Hungary, apart from minority education, bilingual early childhood education is organized and run by private schools, foundations, or companies. These institutions promote language acquisition through play and play-based activities that are, on the one hand, the parents' expectations and on the

other hand, is the requirement of the framework described in the Hungarian Core Program of Kindergarten Education (ÓNOAP, 2012<sup>1</sup>) (Kovács, 2020). Play-based learning is also a key factor in early foreign language acquisition since it is a process similar to the native language acquisition that happens during the everyday routines and activities of young children – of which play is an essential part. Language acquisition is a subconscious process of ability development that is manifested during communicative situations with others (Krashen, 1982a), in contrast with language learning that is a more conscious activity aiming to accumulate knowledge of another language, like grammar, vocabulary, etc. In settings with early years foreign language immersion children ‘pick up’ or absorb the foreign language effortlessly (Hickey, 2014) through meaning-making from the context during interactions with foreign language speaker adults or peers. Meaningful projects in bilingual settings with immersion are the best to provide the ‘comprehensive input’ (Krashen, 1982b, p. 97) necessary to successful language acquisition.

### *The Reggio Emilia Approach (REA)*

The Reggio Emilia Approach took root after World War II in the village of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Here women were shocked and appalled at what fate the world had reached and how everyday people had come to behave. They equated these problems with the lack of critical thinking and responsibility. They came across an educator, Loris Malaguzzi, who joined them in creating a new kind of educational approach and instruction. Malaguzzi and his partners based their ideas of education mainly on the constructivist frame. They followed in the footsteps of Jean Piaget (who Malaguzzi had the chance to observe at the École des Petits and subsequently implemented Piagetian ideas in Italy), Maria Montessori (2011), Rudolf Steiner (2016), John Dewey (1976), Lev Vygotsky (1967), Jerome Bruner (2004), and Lilian Katz (2000). Montessori introduced order, sensory exploration, and an aesthetic experience with natural objects. Steiner’s ideas of moral well-being and focus on the arts and creativity struck a chord. Dewey’s educational reforms pertaining to education for a democratic society seemed just what was needed. Vygotsky’s ideas of social interactions and their role in cognitive development were researched and integrated. His ideas that, through play, one develops abstract meaning were well received. Bruner’s ideas (2004) that children should be left to discover principles by themselves were taken into account. Lilian Katz (2000) was known to introduce the project approach to Reggio at The Compass School in Illinois, USA, which strongly believed in and implemented Reggio-inspired education. From these authors learned the new constructors of the Reggio Emilia Approach, such as Lella Gandini and Carlina Rinaldi. ‘But the educators in Reggio have not just brought in theories and concepts from many places. They have actually reflected on them and experimented with them, creating their own meanings and implications for pedagogical practice’ (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 4).

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<sup>1</sup> Government Decree 363/2012 (XII. 17.) on the Core Programme of Kindergarten Education. <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1200363.KOR> (2021.01.08)

They believed critical thinking to be the cornerstone of an independent and deep thinker, so Malaguzzi's *image of the child* is that of a capable, creative, curious, and motivated, responsible learner (Edwards et al., 2012). As each child is a competent learner, they know, not necessarily consciously, what they need to learn, what they can understand, and what interests them. Listening to children helps teachers support their learning. A child learns by doing; this is why play-centred, hands-on learning allows the child to best investigate and express themselves. In his poem, Malaguzzi<sup>2</sup> expresses the richness of children and how they have a hundred languages, 'a hundred hands/a hundred thoughts/a hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking... of listening/of marvelling, of loving a hundred joys/for singing and understanding a hundred worlds/to discover/a hundred worlds to invent/a hundred worlds to dream'. In this poetic, albeit crucial cornerstone of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, Malaguzzi conveys ideas about the valuable ways of learning through multiple intelligences that are inherent to children and how institutions and society strip our young of these, resulting in the blocking of possible capabilities and capacities of their mind. The teacher reaches each child by offering multiple ways of self-expression and dialogue. Tasks and activities are not uniform; they do not have to be completed by all the children. Every child might take part in different ways, and each child's growth is measured according to their own abilities.

The REA is profoundly an *inclusive approach* by making each child a protagonist in his/her own learning, by teachers listening more intensely and with more focus, children solving problems on their own or with the help of their peers, children becoming teachers to one another, children becoming the narrators of their lives, and children learning to ask questions. The children now can not only practice their independence in everyday routines such as dressing and choosing toys but also in their choice of what they learn and how.

What we might call children with special needs, the REA calls *children with special rights*. These individuals are not segregated from society. They are Citizens with Rights, just like everyone else. Due to their condition, they are individuals with special rights, ones that can help and support them in living the life that is available to everyone else. They have special rights to get whatever support they need to be a part of the group and to support their way of learning. In these settings, the aim is not to include some special children in the standard group but to make groups composed of all who have the right to education. 'There is an underlying belief that every human being has an equal yet incalculable value and that even the youngest among them are citizens with rights' (McNally & Slutsky, 2016, p. 9). Every individual is included in their own way of learning, following their own learning curve.

The Reggio Emilia Approach also discusses *the pedagogy of listening*, whereby educators do not tell students what questions should be asked but ask good questions to assist pupils in posing their own questions. In order to ask well placed, open-ended questions that support a child's learning and open

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<sup>2</sup> "No Way, The Hundred is There" translated by Lella Gandini (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 2)

a child's mind, one must first do a lot of listening and hearing. In inclusive settings, listening has special importance since children with special needs might not express themselves in traditional ways. 'Crucial to this approach, then, is the need for the teacher to listen not only to the voice of the children but also to their actions—their other languages' (Vakil et al., 2003, p. 190). Hearing from the actions and words of the students when and how understanding and, therefore, learning has taken place. Listening to these teaching moments allows educators to realize when there are space and openness to learning. The Reggio Approach believes that listening to someone gives a person importance and value and promotes self-confidence, self-worth, and pride. They claim that children are important and worth listening to. According to Malaguzzi a good project needs only a few elements: 'The first is to produce or find an initial motivation which warms up the children. There is always this sort of prologue that starts by sharing information in the group concerning the theme. Extracting it above all from the thoughts and ideas the children have' (Kurada, 2017)

The Reggio Approach also focuses on *experience-based learning*, discussed earlier in this paper. An *emergent curriculum* supports this learning that in Reggio Approach means children are the forming agents in their learning as much as the adults around them. A curriculum is not supposed to be written at the beginning of the school year. The idea behind this is that children learn best when their curiosity is a form of self-motivation, and since it is impossible to know what these curiosities might be without listening to and hearing the children, it is impossible to plan the curriculum in advance. Thus, the pedagogy of listening resurfaces. In the Reggio Emilia view, teachers listen as a means to deepen the search for meaning. Children are happy dropping a ball over and over again because, in this repetitive experience, they can form ideas about how things act and react. They discover rules and understand in very simple experiences complex things like gravity. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, it is crucial to understand how that child is learning in each stage of development. Listening to their questions, helping them come to answers, and then showing them how to communicate these theories allows them to make sense of their experiences and become critical thinkers. 'This is why we, in Reggio, view children as active, competent, and strong, exploring and finding meaning, not as predetermined, fragile, needy, and incapable. For both adults and children, understanding means being able to develop an interpretive story, a narrative that gives meaning to the world around them' (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 234).

The Reggio Emilia Approach uses both *micro and macro group settings* when organising teaching and learning activities. For children who are just learning social behaviour and, by nature, possess egocentric thinking, the rules and guidelines of polite and successful conversation are not easy to master, especially in a large group of people. For them to learn patience when excited is difficult; maintaining motivation through keeping quiet is hard. Shifting children between micro and macro groups allows them to have freer communication with few children and a more pinpointed topic where their ideas and theories, and thoughts have the space to soar. Once they have come

to some conclusions, they return to the larger group, where they share their findings. Others can reflect on this, and they can learn how to have a back-and-forth conversation. This conversation is not between the teacher and the children but rather occurs among the children themselves. Each group is diverse and different, with the children's capabilities and personalities altering each group and its interactions. In Reggio, the idea of the difference in children is not ignored but embraced (Edwards et al., 2012).

The most effective inclusive early years programs are family-centred since the child is embedded in the family context (Vakil et al., 2003). In the Reggio Emilia Approach, *community-based learning*, including the parents, is essential to learning. 'When the family is comfortable and feels it is possible to share their lives with others, they have a much greater desire to be involved with the child and are more likely to be interested in the quality of their relationship with this child' (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 195). In REA the purpose of education is related to creating community, to create a learning environment 'where the child can develop a sense of intellectual autonomy while belonging to a group' (McNally & Slutsky, 2016, p. 10). Constructivist theory shows (Nahalka, 2013) that a child constructs his/her knowledge from his/her environment and the parents of children are a crucial part of that environment. In REA 'knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed, encompassing multiple forms of knowing, and comprised of meaningful wholes' (Hewett, 2001, p. 95). Parents are not consumers of service but should be partners and participants of their child's education. They are expected and supported in taking part in the dialogue about the educational program. From the teachers' perspective, 'the concept of professional development has been extended to include the importance of learning from parents, therapists and the children themselves' (Thompson, 2006, p. 13).

The *involvement of research* is also one of the most important characteristics of REA and is used for various purposes. On the one hand, it strengthens the possibility of critical thinking. In more determined instruction, children might be shown to accept ideas and information from a higher source and taught to take it for granted, not to question it. They are also shown that they probably do not have the information and cannot get it themselves. With research, this changes because children are not given answers but are promoted to find things out for themselves. A teacher's 'goal is not so much to "facilitate" learning in the sense of "making smooth or easy" but rather to "stimulate" it by making problems more complex, involving, and arousing' (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 155). This way, they are presented with the experience that the adult has faith in them that they can manage to further their own learning through research. Also, showing research techniques hands the children tools which might help them to attain knowledge.

Research – collecting documentation – is also the most important tool for approaching work as self-reflective practitioners in inclusive settings (Vakil et al., 2003). 'One could say that *pedagogical documentation*, as used in Reggio, is a *specific attitude about life*' (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 226). Teachers walk around and take notes of the observations throughout the activities, such as movements, moods, non-verbal and verbal communications of the children,

and their own thoughts during the process. In Reggio Emilia, documentation is a tool for the teacher to learn and research the children. They then sit with their co-workers and discuss these observations, which is how they 'develop' the curriculum. In the Malaguzzi Center, Italy, there is a whole research library that goes back to the birth of this approach, to the 1940's, where all the projects can be found that the teachers have done with the children. This material is accessible to all of Reggio Emilia and even outsiders upon request. Although the practices related to the Reggio Approach are different in all settings, the image of the child has remained the same recognition of competency and curiosity.

### ***Research methods***

Our research aims to identify the aspects of Reggio Emilia Approach that support inclusive education. Our research was conducted in a mixed-age group within a bilingual setting in Budapest. The priority of keeping the school's anonymity resulted in the selection of information on special features to avoid the institution's identification. Different qualitative research methods were used to gain a deeper understanding, and data were collected during the 2019/2020 school year period. Document analysis helped to understand the local pedagogical program and the mission of the school. Participant observation in the classroom and informal discussions with the three teachers who work in the bilingual class provided information about the approach in practice. Also, one-on-one unstructured interviews were recorded at the end of the school year to reflect on the experiences of the three teachers regarding the inclusive aspects of the Reggio Emilia Approach. Teachers' reflective journals, observation notes, planning documentation, and children's transcripts were explored by qualitative text analysis, focusing on how the main principles of REA supported inclusive education in the bilingual early years setting. In the data analysis, extracts from the interviews and the documentation material are used.

## **Results**

### ***The context***

The English-speaking group in this pre-school department of the K-12 school was launched in 2015 based on a two-pillar idea. On the one hand, there seemed to be a growing need for families to provide their children with early English education. Hungarian families decided to invest time and resources in their children to provide them with such knowledge early on. Also, a growing number of international families or mixed families began to join the school's community, for whom it was important to provide bilingual education for their children. The second pillar was that the elementary school had previously embarked on a bilingual educational program, where children received ten of their weekly classes in English. These classes begin from the first grade and are taught by native English teachers. Thus came the idea of extending English



instruction to the smaller children in the kindergarten (age 3-7). This way, the bilingual program not only gains interest from outside but can provide an in-house supply of students entering the program.

Due to the fact that this is the only English-speaking group in the kindergarten, it has always been a mixed age group with 20-23 children. It is mostly composed of Hungarian children, but children from mixed families or families who have lived abroad also attend. The children are exposed to English through immersion (Chaparro, 2020). Children know that the teachers understand them even if they speak Hungarian, and there is no rule that they cannot. Teachers often repeat their sentences and questions back to them in English. Music and songs, everyday instructions, and conversation flow in English. Teachers will rarely speak Hungarian when they feel that the children's psychological and emotional development overrides their need for language acquisition. It is a way to support them in understanding social interactions and ideas of truth and honesty, especially when crises arise.

Building upon their Hungarian knowledge to attain the new language is helpful. As teachers report in the interviews, some children do not speak English for months; they observe and only use one or two-word phrases like 'thank you' or 'good-bye', until they are sufficiently comfortable and confident. Then all of a sudden, they start to speak in full sentences. Others talk in a mixture of English, Hungarian, and nonsense, communicating with urgency. Some children from bilingual homes switch between languages easily and quickly, even within the same game. Others need time to switch in the morning and then stay with it all day.

Since children learn English in this group through language acquisition, it is hard for them to translate or talk to parents in English. This makes it difficult sometimes to make the knowledge of children visible to their parents. The teachers share many videos with parents so that children's behaviour in class and the use of language and social interactions become visible. The older children very often help by sharing their better understanding of spoken English to the younger ones who do not yet understand so well. This is also an aspect that gives value and self-confidence to older children.

### ***A responsible learner: Image of the child***

The Reggio Emilia Approach expects to shift ideas within the teachers' minds regarding the image of the child. They have to restrain themselves to listen more and differently, to wait and allow children to make mistakes and learn from them, to allow children to work out their own answers and theories, and to offer the assistance of other children before helping them themselves. During the interviews, the teacher mentioned many examples of this. For example, a child once brought a paper tube to the teacher with a large marble stuck inside. The child was asked to try to experiment and free the marble himself. Other children nearby were asked how they could solve this problem. First, they started to push the marble in with a pencil. This resulted in the marble being stuck in the other side of the tube. More pencils were jammed in the

tube, which resulted in the marble falling out. The child was very happy, but his attention was brought to the fact that now many pencils were jammed in the tube that needed to be freed as well. Another child suggested they needed something longer. They came up with the idea of making a very long 'stick' of markers stuck together, connected to each other, cap to bottom. With this poking device, they freed the pencils. This example shows how much learning, cooperation, problem-solving, and communication development would have been wasted had the teacher just solved the boy's problem.

Children learn best from their peers, especially in a mixed-age group. Seeing that someone equal to them can do something that seems impossible can strengthen the children's belief in themselves and show them that challenges are not unattainable. An example mentioned a little boy who had difficulty to butter his bread. The teachers supported the child by exhibiting a belief that he can solve the problem at hand. He tried a couple of times, then returned with more frustration about not being able to do what he needed. Then he was asked if he can think of someone from the group who could help him with the buttering. He said that Bert could do it. The teacher suggested he might ask Bert then to help him. He did, and Bert happily buttered his bread. In this scenario, not only did the boy experience the faith others had in him, but he saw that another child, evidently not so different from himself, has the ability he himself does not yet possess. Communication was strengthened, and bonds were formed between the children. Bert also experienced that he can be a help to others, making him proud.

The child, as a competent learner, speaks about the fact that a child's interests show the level of development that he/she is at. By relying on and listening to children for new themes and topics of interest, teachers can support them in their individual learning curves, differentiating between the children. They will fixate on things, practicing them over and over again, so by allowing them to bring in ideas, teachers support their unique development. Still, it is very important for teachers to plan and organise, but rather than following their own ideas about what would interest the children, with good listening, they can build on the children's needs. Also, the children's need to express their ideas and interests to the teachers enhances their use of English and allows them to practice and build vocabulary. Through project work it is important, 'to have already in ourselves, as adults, the awareness of what one is doing and what could be done. That means there are already many expectations and predictions or hypotheses on the part of adults. Some of these expectations will be disappointed, others will become greater, lost or found again. We will have to run after some others, during the journey that the children make in the course of the project' (Kurada, 2017).

The teachers also rely on children as capable storytellers. Offering children to tell their own stories themselves gives an opportunity to grasp their experience better and show their abilities of communication. The fact that they can tell their stories shows to them that these stories and the events of their lives, their ideas are important and valued. Teachers also record these stories and transcribe them. They offer children a printed-out version and read

it to them, and they have an opportunity to illustrate their own stories. These illustrated versions appear as documentations for others to see and for the children to revisit (see Figure 1.).

**Figure 1**

*Narrative and drawing of a girl aged 4 (example from a child's transcript)*

There was a little boy, her name is Marci and he offered it a girl and his name was Zoé. And his go out and sometime the girl goes to travel to Greece and very happy and so he comes back and his play together with the boy. Another time the boy go auto the girl house. And there he play together and very good time there and he go then home. And one time he have another girl and he have a birthday and his name is Lea and he has a very pretty two cakes and that was very yummy and so eat it all up in his stomach and then he goes bed and sleep. The end.



Another important aspect of a competent child is the value and ability to ask questions. Good questions, open-ended questions often lead to other questions, and are stepping stones to deepening knowledge. By experiencing this process of formulating questions, answering them, assessing the answers then formulating new questions, they are taught a tool for future studies and learning.

***The emergent curriculum***

The emergent curriculum allows children to achieve higher motivation in the things that are happening in the classroom. It requires cooperation and collaboration between peers, and this, in turn, requires communication. The need for communication pushes them to try and express themselves in English. Discussions of varied topics allow children to hear and learn new vocabulary and be present in conversations when others are looking something up, deepening their passive language skills as well.

Projects can come from anywhere, and the only thing that can make one project better or stronger than the other is authenticity and motivation. Whether the basic idea comes from a teacher or a child does not matter as long as the interest in it is genuine and therefore the motivation of teachers and children is high.

When we did the Jonah project, and we looked at images of whales, the children reacted first in Hungarian, saying that the whales had no teeth. We supported this new knowledge by repeating the observation in English and asking them questions about their teeth. Teeth are a focal point of children this age since the exchange of teeth is happening. So, we had many discussions counting our teeth, telling stories of how we lost our teeth and what happened afterward. Children laughed about how the water now trickles out between the teeth through the holes. All in all children were excited and motivated, accepting new language inputs and repeating them, and by the end of the project each kid showed a definite development. (Excerpt from a teacher interview)

This project is a perfect example of the inclusion that takes place naturally in the group. If we look at inclusion only from the linguistic view, each child has been included and progressed their own knowledge. All steps were valued and celebrated, thus making each child accomplished.

A project, however, can also emerge from the problem of a broken table. Rather than throwing it out or just passing it onto the caretaker to fix it, it can be brought in front of the children to see how they would tackle it. Projects in an emergent curriculum can be short or long while multiple projects can be taking place alongside one another.

### ***The involvement of research***

Research is an integral part of the Reggio Emilia Approach. It is done through experimentation with objects, light, distance, or basically anything that catches the children's interest. Technology is readily used to support children in their hypothesising and experimenting. Images are often used to demonstrate and illustrate the world to the children by observing animals, lands, cultures, traditions that are not accessible to them in their own environment. They hear the teachers and children discuss, point, and illustrate, building on their passive language skills. As children try to express their questions or observations, they activate words and begin to speak. Through the Reggio Emilia philosophy of listening and following an emergent curriculum, the teachers have increased motivation and activity.

### ***Micro and macro group settings***

It is not easy to work together with children of all levels of development, knowledge of English, and concentration abilities. The bilingual group is a mixed age group of 3-7. The variation of children's ages gives a rather great challenge when tackling any given task. The parents' expectations are also different from the teachers of a 3-year-old and that of a 7-year-old. With the Reggio Emilia Approach, the idea of coming in and out of smaller and larger groups has been supported very much. It is not necessarily the age of the children that best groups them. Sometimes the interests of children allow for higher levels of motivation.

What we saw when we visited the Reggio Emilia setting in Italy is that all projects or research topics are done in micro-groups. When the children were doing a yearlong project about the “piazza” (the square), children started noticing how in squares many people sat together and talked. A few children volunteer to discover the way people sit on a bench through clay. Another group observes the same position of the human body but tries to investigate this through drawing. As they sat to model for each other, a child used a digital camera to take pictures of the bodies on the bench from different perspectives and angles. Each small group returned to sit with the whole group once they finished to discuss what they have observed or understood about the problem at hand; in this case, how to portray a sitting form. Each group brought different problems or ideas into the mix. The group that worked with clay had to figure out how to hold up the pieces of heavy clay before the firing and came up with the idea of using things to prop these pieces up with. Each time a group returned to the whole class and had discussions, the children conversed, listened to each other, and offered ideas on how to solve problems. Then new ideas emerged that needed to be researched and now teams were set up according to children’s interests. Everyone understood the process through the constant sharing of information. (Excerpt from a teacher interview)

An example of the effort in using micro and macro groups was with the story of Jonah and the big fish. In this project, this going back and forth between small and large group work was being researched and tried out.

The most difficult part, for now, was revisiting the large group and sharing our experiences. It seems that the pedagogy of listening is not self-explanatory. We first have to teach the children to listen, and sometimes, with such a variety of ages, it can be quite a challenge. (Excerpt from a teacher interview)

Keeping circle time with the children is a difficulty due to the children’s different attention span, different levels of English, and general understanding. Using micro groups and only being together for sharing of the experiences helped a great deal. Circle time was no longer used in the traditional sense of the word. Sharing their theories, observations, and ideas specific to a research were more focused, taking less time. Being in smaller groups allowed the teachers to focus on children’s individual needs and gave a chance for better listening and handling of different lengths of attention spans. As one teacher observed:

We still need to work on the micro and macro group management and the listening in the larger groups. One aspect of this is to work in a way that the teacher is not the central figure of conversation, to whom all answers or questions are directed. Therefore producing a star-shaped conversation model, but rather aiming for children to direct their ideas and words to each other. Perhaps, this would also be easier introduced in the smaller groups, that than we can broaden for the large group settings.” (Excerpt from a teacher interview)

In order to focus children's thinking and open their minds, open-ended questions have to be asked. It is also a challenge for the children since open-ended questions are much more difficult to answer. Expectations of children vary depending on their age and each child's individual language development. An interesting indicator that more open-ended questions were being asked was that children soon were comfortable in understanding the English questions 'Why?' and 'How?' Even though they sometimes replied in Hungarian, their understanding of the question was there which could be seen by the responses that followed it. This very short conversation is such an example from the observation notes.

Here, the children were sitting around, playing with clay. Three children aged 5-6 worked together, originally making a space landscape with asteroids and such. As they kept adding pieces, space turned into the sea, and ships were built. The asteroids (which were dried balls of red clay) turned into cannonballs on the pirate ships. The conversation is about the transformation of these balls. Even though the how question proved too hard for the child to answer in English, he understood the question and responded with that understanding in Hungarian.

T: Are they changing?

D: Yes.

T: How can they change?

D: Űgy, hogy most már vízen vagyunk. (Because we are on water now.)

### ***Community-based learning***

The Reggio Emilia Approach believes that children thrive best in environments where home and school are interlinked and connected. Parents' support means a lot to teachers; in turn they try to support the parents and families as much as possible. They introduced individual parent-teacher meetings for all the families. These meetings are noted, and notes are always sent to the parents as reminders of the topics and perhaps the resolutions discussed.

This year, to enhance our connection with parents in our day to day lives, we asked them how they would see their involvement or what they would be interested in at our beginning of the year group meeting. Many parents voiced that they are interested in how we celebrate the Shabbat each Friday. So we invited the parents to come and join. Many of the parents accepted this invitation and have joined us during the first half-year. We asked the parents to come prepared with a little story to tell the group. (Excerpt from a teacher interview)

Parents are also welcomed to share some personal interest, like they showed about scuba diving or their native country of Italy. These 'presentations' are always helped by the teachers, making it playful, active and interesting for the children. This form of cooperation enables the parents to experience how the class works, which is usually followed by a stronger appreciation of teachers' work. Also, children seeing their parents as part-takers of their lives, showing interest and joy make them proud and feel worth.

In my understanding, the aim of the Reggio Emilia Approach is to give substance and voice to the rights of the children, parents, and teachers for a high quality, participatory education capable of promoting increased awareness to produce a culture of education and not just to offer educational services". (Excerpt from a teacher interview)

### ***Documentation***

Documentation aims to make the learning visible, aims to inform the parents of things happening in the group, aims to allow colleagues to bounce off each other's ideas, but above all; it aims to raise the child into a being of value. *"Through the exhibition of their ideas, their masterpieces, their works, and their pictures, we communicate that what they do is worth something"*. (Excerpt from a teacher interview)

The text on documentation is not a subtitle or a narration of the image that can be seen. It can show cooperation, the road leading to the end-product. Through these pictures, the children can also revisit experiences that they had; they therefore put these documents in a visible place where the children can see them and connect to them. These images also allow them to remember, reuse, and retain the vocabulary connected to a given project. With time, these learning experiences that they have, sink in, and seeing the documentation can enhance the ideas in their heads and enable them to further their thinking of the topic resulting in something called a relaunch.

### **Summary**

The research identified different aspects of inclusive education, which proved to be very fruitful and adaptable to a local Reggio Emilia Approach. This leads to a different, broader concept of inclusion.

Through this different concept of inclusion, whereby we do not refer to the insertion of special needs children into a group but rather talk of an acceptance and celebration of diversity throughout the entire group, a lot can be learnt. In the Reggio Emilia philosophy, every child has the same rights to education, the same right of citizens as all. The fact that someone has special needs translates into that child having special rights that enable him or her to get the support they need to partake in the same education as is available to all. This vision drastically changes the teachers' attitude toward the child, the other children, and the education itself. The same way one sees children accept others who are younger, know less, are capable of fewer things, children also accept and embrace other kinds of differences.

In this particular setting in Hungary, children with special rights have been included. In a curriculum that emerges from the children's interests through project-based and experience-based learning, children can discover the world at their own pace. Children can work in micro and macro groups on meaning-making and understanding in activities tailored to their individual needs. The teachers scaffold their learning as facilitators supporting independence, cooperation, and peer-assistance. With special emphasis on community-

based learning, support is offered to the families regardless of their children's challenges since all children have challenges.

Each child is unique in language, looks, and personality. If a teacher is truly dedicated to researching the children in their group, s/he will find that each child poses a challenge. Each child can be connected to differently; each child has different preferences of learning methods, and each child carries a set of values and ideals brought from home. By filling the environment with variables, teachers allow for the inclusion of all children into activities, problems, and thinking. In short:

The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivation and richer the experiences. We must widen the range of topics and goals, the types of situations we offer and their degree of structure, the kinds of combinations and resources and materials, and the possible interaction with things, peers, and adults. Moreover, widening the range of possibilities for children also has consequences for others. It renders teachers more attentive and aware, and makes them more capable of observing and interpreting children's gestures and speech (Excerpted from an interview between Lella Gandini and Loris Malaguzzi, Edwards et al., 2012, p. 54).

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