

Experiencing the Reggio Emilia Pedagogical Approach: A Narrative Self-Study

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Abstract

This research aimed to critically reflect on my exposure to the principles of the REA and deepen my understanding and exploration of the role of the child, educator, and learning environment. In this qualitative study, I relied on the narrative self-study method to describe my interpretation of the REA from ECE to research assistant, which was organized into three broad themes: the child, educator, and learning environment. This study was guided by the following research questions: What is my interpretation of Reggio Emilia approach for the role of the child, educator, and learning environment based on my experience, from ECE to research assistant in early childhood education? How might this critical engagement with the REA impact my professional capacity in ECE? I found that the REA encompasses not only the principle of observation and documentation in its simplest form, but also crucial principles of the role of the child, educator, and learning environment. I learned that educators must integrate these principles to provide children with rich and independent learning experiences that honor their rights, interests, and individuality. Through this exploration, I gained insight into the value of these principles and their significance in creating joyful and enriching learning experiences for each child.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The early years are a critical developmental period that plays a vital role in shaping a child's future, influencing cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Britto et al., 2018; Twardosz, 2012). Children thrive when exposed to early experiences that engage their emotions and foster an appreciation for their surroundings (Edwards & Gandini, 2015). It is the rich experiences with people, places, *and* materials that empower children to explore their interests and form meaningful connections between their exploration and the construction of knowledge; such nurturing and stimulating early learning experiences are critical for ensuring well-being, long-term success, and productivity of individuals (Britto et al., 2018). Formative experiences not only set the stage for navigating life successfully but also contribute meaningfully to society by fostering children's problem-solving skills, language development, and heightened critical thinking abilities (Dawson et al., 2000).

This narrative self-study study focuses on my professional experience as an early childhood educator (ECE), including my role in creating rich experiences and knowledge of ways in which to set the stage for meaningful learning. My philosophy recognizes the significant impact of the formative years on children's lifelong development. My dedication to early childhood education is prioritized in establishing a nurturing environment. My commitment is grounded in the firm belief that experiences in early years shape a child's trajectory. Consequently, my teaching practice focuses on creating spaces that facilitate children's growth and afford them the freedom to choose what they want to engage with, enriching their learning. In alignment with this philosophy, I advocate for and actively foster a supportive and inclusive environment where each child's unique strengths and interests are recognized and nurtured. By acknowledging the individuality of each learner and adapting my teaching methods accordingly,

I aim to empower them to become confident, curious individuals who are *actively* involved in shaping their own learning journey. I strongly believe when ECEs are equipped with a thorough understanding of a specific learning approach, they are capable of making a lasting impact on children's learning and development through their teaching role. This philosophy highlights the pivotal role ECEs play in early childhood education and the responsibilities that come with it.

I recognize the crucial role of intentionally applying a specific pedagogical approach to harness the transformative potential of early childhood education (Entz, 2007). As an ECE, one approach that has captivated my interest and aligns with my philosophy on children's learning and development is the Reggio Emilia approach (REA). Among the myriad of pedagogies available, each with its distinct philosophies and strategies, the REA stands out as both innovative and widely recognized (Westerberg & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021). This pedagogical model places great emphasis on a child's inherent curiosity and the fundamental belief that children are capable and competent learners. On a global scale, Aljabreen (2020) states that the REA has gained worldwide acclaim, becoming a source of inspiration for educators and learners; based on the concept that children and educators collaborate as co-investigators in the learning journey, REA fosters an environment that promotes exploration and inquiry into various teaching methodologies. The REA has significantly influenced early childhood education, providing a dynamic and ever-evolving learning experience preparing young children with the skills and mindset essential for future success (Edward, 2002).

I am also drawn to the Reggio pedagogy given its dedication to supporting educators in providing an inclusive and personalized learning environment that meets children's diverse needs (Mitchiner et al., 2018). Their philosophy resonates with my belief that learning is a collaborative and enjoyable journey between children and educators, fostering comprehensive

and engaging learning experiences. I appreciate how the REA both aligns with my philosophy on children's learning and development *and* reinforces my belief that a collaborative and enjoyable learning journey, involving both children and educators, contributes to the construction of inclusive and enriching learning experiences. This study enabled me to critically reflect on my experiences with the REA in practice, education and training, research, as well as through critical friend dialogues.

Brief Overview of Reggio Emilia Approach

Reggio Emilia is a beautiful city located in Northern Italy. It is home to the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre that was designed in a modern structure representing the REA. The centre serves as a hub for the REA, offering educators from across the globe the opportunity to come together, share their curiosity and interest, and enhance their understanding and application of this approach through collaborative learning and reflection.

Loris Malaguzzi was a psychologist, and an early education pioneer, who advocated for a progressive learning approach for children following the challenging period of World War II (Tours & Simsar, 2018). With the collaborative support of parents in the city of Reggio Emilia, he emphasized the necessity of adopting a progressive approach to meet the urgent learning needs of children (Aden & Theodotou, 2019). This led to the development of the REA, encompassing innovative practices and philosophical principles recognizing children as active learners, capable of shaping their knowledge with the support and guidance of adults within a rich learning environment (McNally & Slutsky, 2017).

The REA is characterized by its dynamic nature, it adapts and develops with the growth and changing needs of children (Tours & Simsar, 2018). Unlike rigid methodologies, the REA

recognizes that children are in a constant state of development, and therefore, the learning approach should mirror this evolution. This implies that as children acquire new skills, interests, and perspectives, the teaching methods and learning environment should also change to support and engage them effectively. REA fosters a philosophy that views learning as a collaborative and evolving journey. Reflecting its success, Emerson and Linder (2021) stated the REA places early childhood education in the city of Reggio Emilia (Italy) as a reference for the best early learning methods worldwide.

Reggio Emilia Approach in Practice

The approach highly values collaborative efforts and imaginative contributions, fostering an environment where both children and educators play an integral role in the learning process. REA allows educators to use creativity to inspire children's learning and imagination (Senent et al., 2021). In addition, REA creates an environment that actively encourages children to think, reflect, and engage in meaningful discussions, leading their learning journey in the development of unique learning theories (Emerson & Linder, 2021). In contrast to my past experiences in Reggio adapted programs, which focused on correcting and training children in a directive manner, REA underscores the importance of an ongoing collaboration between children and educators, fostering a powerful and supportive learning environment (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). The implication is a shift from a traditional directive approach to a collaborative and dynamic model, where learning is shared among all participants, including educators and children, within their shared learning environment (McNally & Slutsky, 2017).

To my knowledge, there is no literature supporting the application of a single Reggio principle to facilitate children's learning effectively. Instead, I have come across extensive literature that underscores the utilization of all three main principles, as a foundational

framework. As such, this narrative self-study aims to reflect on my limited knowledge of Reggio principles through sharing my work experiences and how my knowledge grew through higher education and research experiences related to these three principles.

Reggio Emilia Approach: A Blend of Constructivism and Social Constructivism

The philosophy of REA is widely acknowledged for its focus on a child's authentic explorations and the essential role of social interaction in the learning process. At the heart of the Reggio philosophy lies a deep belief in the innate inquisitiveness and inventiveness of children, nurturing their natural desire to explore and acquire knowledge (Edwards et al., 2011). The Reggio learning philosophy is closely connected with two learning theories: constructivism, and social constructivism (Heineman, 2022). Constructivism emphasizes that children construct knowledge and understanding through hands-on experiences and exploration based on their own needs (Heineman, 2022). In REA, this means providing a rich environment where children can inquire, experiment, and engage in self-directed learning. In REA, children engage with the world, contemplating their experiences as they construct their own understandings and integrate new thoughts and ideas into their existing knowledge (Edwards, 2011).

Social constructivism highlights the importance of social interactions and collaboration in the learning process (Manera, 2022). Heineman (2022) underscores the importance of social constructivism, emphasizing that meaningful learning occurs when children engage collaboratively in a socially situated environment. This theory posits that knowledge is actively formed through such interactions and experiences, highlighting the significance of both as a driving force for children's development. In REA, children are encouraged to collaborate with others, share ideas, and participate in meaningful dialogue, fostering both individual growth and a sense of community through the shared experience of learning. Social constructivism is evident

in the approach, as teachers respect the child's ability to generate their own questions and to make and revisit their choices (Baker, 2015).

In both theories educators play a crucial role in facilitating children's learning experiences, recognizing them as capable, resourceful learners who construct knowledge independently through exploration and interactions with peers and educators. Corroborating these principles, Dewey (1916) stated learning is a social construct and children should be the center of their own learning as learning occurs when children apply their previous and current knowledge to build a new and meaningful experience. In effect, children need to be the main character in their learning (Dewey, 1916). Additionally, educators work as co-learners so both children and educators can grow together when they share learning activities in a democratic environment, offering various learning opportunities (Dewey, 1916).

Reggio Adapted Programs

The childcare facilities where I have worked inform educators that their learning environment is influenced by the principles of the REA. However, these facilities were not officially named as Reggio adapted programs, they kept their original names for the public but communicate verbally to their staff that they embraced the REA principles. Nevertheless, they incorporated only few aspects of the REA. For the purpose of this research, I will refer to the daycare facilities where I worked as "Reggio adapted programs". Educators in these work environments are directed to align with the Reggio philosophy, emphasizing observation and documentation through which to support children's learning journey. In these Reggio adapted programs, educators choose to observe two children during their play every two weeks, write scripts about their actions by asking a few questions, and take photos of what they do. Educators are then tasked with filling bulletin boards with children's work.

The learning environment included materials selected based on their availability in storage spaces, directing children to follow educators' lead rather than encouraging them to pursue their own interests. That work environment promoted educators as primary leaders in creating knowledge. Additionally, in these Reggio adapted programs, educators were led to prepare activities for each occasion in order for children to replicate them. Lastly, the lack of collaborative practices was evident among educators, as the learning environment placed greater emphasis on individual observations rather than fostering teamwork based on collaborative decision-making.

Proposed Study

Narratives self-study involves the introspective process of sharing and examining our own experiences, thoughts, and emotions (Samaras & Roberts, 2011). This narrative self-study drew upon a decade of experience, as an ECE in Reggio adapted programs as well as my recent experience as a research assistant. In my practical experiences in Reggio adapted programs, my responsibility was to employ observation and documentation to support children in their learning journey, with a central emphasis on the educator serving as the leader in the classroom environment. This role is but a small aspect of the role of the educator in REA. I recently learned this in my experience as a research assistant, where I was exposed to a much more in-depth representation of the REA enhancing my understanding. Thus, this study critically engaged with narrative accounts of my professional experience as an ECE in Reggio adapted settings and as a research assistant studying REA

Positioning the Researcher

I am a mother of two children who worked as a science teacher in Jordan, teaching students from grades four to six for a decade. Teaching has always been my passion, and being a mom has further fueled this enthusiasm. After immigrating to Canada, I was determined to persist in the field of education. Even though English is not my first language, I have chosen to embrace this challenge and pursue further education. Thus, I returned to school and pursued a Diploma in Early Childhood Education to become a registered ECE. After obtaining my diploma I worked as an ECE in three different daycare settings in Ontario from 2009 to 2020. As an ECE, Reggio adapted programs primarily guided me to observe children and document their work through photographs. As educators, we were not encouraged to consider the individual interests of children, and instead provided all children with the same toys and materials available in our storage spaces. I found these practices unsatisfactory as it reflected an educator-led approach, which restricted children's active involvement in their own learning. This dissatisfaction prompted a critical reflection on my career path, leading me to the realization that my knowledge and skillset required further development to align with my professional aspirations.

Motivated by a desire to overcome the limitations of my past experiences, I made a deliberate decision to pursue a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECE) degree in 2020. This step not only reignited my passion for early childhood education but also propelled me toward further academic pursuits. Recognizing the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the field, I took the next step in my educational journey by subsequently pursuing a master's in education (MEd) at Brock University. This intentional progression reflects my commitment to advancing my knowledge and skills, aiming to contribute more effectively to the dynamic and evolving realm of early childhood education. My learning journey into REA became more

insightful when I started the BECE program and continued throughout my research assistant work in the MEd program.

In my personal philosophy of early childhood education, I am unwavering in my belief that learning centres must transcend traditional methods that position educators as central figures in children's learning processes. Instead, children's learning should exist as a joyful and engaging experience uniquely tailored to the individual needs of each child. The core tenet of my approach is centered on embracing and celebrating diversities, recognizing that every child brings a unique tapestry of abilities, interests, and backgrounds to the learning environment. Through a steadfast commitment to respectful guidance and a deep understanding of learning and development, I am dedicated to instilling a genuine passion for learning that extends beyond rote knowledge. My goal is to empower children, nurturing not only a love for learning but also the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive in our evolving world.

Situating My Query

My quest for knowledge about the fundamental principles of REA was sparked by a significant gap in my understanding. This gap led me to re-evaluate my experiences with this approach and delve into literature to investigate the role of the child, educator, and learning environment. Recognizing this knowledge gap was a driving force behind my decision to further my studies in education. In the BECE program, I gained a comprehensive and critical understanding of child development, pedagogical approaches, and educational theories specific to early childhood. Additionally, my journey in the master's program equipped me with the knowledge and skills necessary to create engaging and inviting learning environments for young children. This provided me with a solid foundation to contribute as an educator, nurturing the holistic development of young learners, shaping the next generation. Most recently, in my

research assistant experience with my supervisor, Dr. Sandra Della Porta, I was deeply engaged in the analysis and coding of principles integral to the RE pedagogy for a project on power in early childhood education pedagogical approaches. This hands-on research experience improved my analytical skills and fueled my enthusiasm for delving into the three fundamental principles of REA to explore and understand it in order to implement it. I am particularly captivated by how these principles are intricately designed to empower young children through their learning experiences. My quest for knowledge continues as I endeavour to engage in the process by delving deep into my experiences with the REA.

This narrative exploration of my own experiences and learning journey into REA aimed to enhance my understanding of how to implement the main principles that foster meaningful and authentic learning experiences for children. Based on my work experiences in Reggio adapted programs, I felt compelled to select this project topic and adopt the narrative self-study to engage with REA beyond observation and documentation. This research provided me with the freedom to reflect on my experience with R principles from working as an ECE to research assistant, and to gain a deeper insight into the main principles of this approach.

Resolving Cognitive Dissonance

Following my experiences in Reggio adapted programs, where I identified limitations in my practices, particularly in terms of operating separately from the children, this research aims to interrogate my limited exposure to the principles of REA. Through a qualitative study utilizing the narrative self-study method, I reflected on my professional experiences with REA. This process sought to reevaluate my professional practices and broaden insights into the dynamic roles of the child, educator, and learning environment. By delving into the Reggio principles, I

strengthened my knowledge on how to inspire children to have a significant and effective impact on their unique learning journey.

Educators have a fundamental role in children's learning as they interact with them daily. Educators observe, guide, facilitate, and support children's needs and interests to provide them with various learning opportunities that allow them to investigate, imagine, wonder, and explore their surroundings. In most of my previous workplaces, educators were focused on watching children during their play and recorded their actions without actively interacting with them to extend their learning knowledge and understand their way of thinking and assumption about their surrounding world. By reflecting on my practice and experience in Reggio adapted programs, I aimed to deepen my understanding of how to adapt the RE principles to provide children with meaningful and authentic learning experiences in a Canadian context.

Research Question

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1- What is my interpretation of Reggio Emilia approach for the role of the child, educator, and learning environment based on my experience, from ECE to research assistant in early childhood education?
- 2- How might this critical engagement with the REA impact my professional capacity in ECE?

Rationale

The incorporation of narrative self-study holds significant value that enabled me to engage in reflective practices that deepened my understanding of Reggio pedagogical practices contributing to continuous professional development on how to adapt Reggio principles. This

research holds importance as it not only prompts me to contemplate my limited practices in Reggio adapted programs but also serves as a valuable resource for fellow educators who wish to introspect on their journey with this pedagogical approach. By grasping the fundamental principles of REA, the role of the child, educator, and learning environment, an ECE can enhance children's learning experiences, empowering them to become proactive, and curious learners leading their own journey to knowledge. Additionally, understanding the fundamental principles of the REA can support educators to create learning environment that nurtures holistic child development, fosters active and independent learning, and empowers both children and educators to collaboratively explore and construct knowledge, enhancing the quality of early learning practices. The objective of this research was to deeply reflect on my interpretation of REA for the role of the child, educator, and learning environment based on my experience, from ECE to research assistant in early childhood education.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the course of eleven years, I was immersed in programs that adapted the REA; in this research, I intend to reflect on my professional and educational experiences using the three fundamental principles that underpin the REA educational philosophy. These experiences motivated me to delve into the core principles and advocate for their integration within educators' practices in Reggio adapted programs. I believe embracing the REA can significantly enhance the learning experience for both educators and children.

Globally recognized and embraced by educators, the REA is a non-traditional, innovative philosophy prioritizing respect for children's explorations (Ramsay, 2017). Emphasizing active learning and collaboration, educators in this framework serve as guides, fostering a personalized and inclusive learning environment. Through flexibility, the REA encourages a supportive relationship between educators and children, enhancing the learning atmosphere without traditional constraints (Edwards et al., 2011; Senent et al., 2021).

This chapter is crafted to present REA as a global approach, the basis of the REA: a child-focused philosophy, REA guiding principles, related narrative studies, theoretical influences on my perspective, the gap in literature, and summary. It also emphasizes my role as a researcher in identifying and addressing potential limitations, offering transparency. These paragraphs ensure readers gain well rounded knowledge of the REA and understand my position as the subject of this narrative self-study.

Reggio Emilia as a Global Approach

There is no doubt that REA has a global influence on early childhood education and is a source of inspiration which allows children and educators to investigate ways of learning. In fact, Reggio Emilia, Italy, is known for having one of the world's best preschools (McNally &

Slutsky 2017). REA is not a traditional learning model, instead it is an evolving learning experience (Westerberg & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021). Education is a global term that encompasses responsibility as a main factor in children's learning (Wilson & Ellis, 2007). REA is the only approach that identifies responsibility among three teachers, the child, educator, and learning environment (Wilson & Ellis, 2007). REA has received international recognition for its commitment to high-quality principles in the field of early childhood education, which aims to create inclusive learning experiences that honor children's learning hypotheses (Baker, 2015). Furthermore, what made REA a popular approach is that it focuses on the powerful image of the child who is born with ability to connect with others, full of intelligence, curiosity, and ready to explore the world. This vision is built upon the relationships *among* children, *between* children and educators, and *between* children with their surrounding environment (Malaguzzi, 1993).

Basis of the REA: A Child-Centered Philosophy

Rooted in the belief that each child is a unique and capable individual, the REA is characterized by a commitment to a child-centered philosophy (Aden & Theodotou, 2019). Dewey (1916) advocated for the child-centered approach, positioning the child at the heart of the learning process by prioritizing their interests, experiences, and natural curiosity. Emphasizing the interconnectedness of learning with real-life experiences, Dewey advocated for an educational philosophy characterized by active inquiry and exploration. In his vision, children assume a central role in the learning process, while educators become co-learners. This creates an environment where both children and educators mutually grow through *shared* learning activities. The democratic setting promotes empowerment for children to explore a variety of learning opportunities, allowing them to actively shape their experiences in a meaningful

manner. This forms the bedrock of the REA, guiding educators in creating an environment that honors children's potential (Aden & Theodotou, 2019).

The REA, celebrated for its innovative philosophy, offers a collection of vital principles and values guiding educators in their interactions and collaboration with children through a child-centered approach, placing children at the forefront of their learning journey (Aden & Theodotou, 2019; Finegan, 2001; McNally & Slutsky, 2017). Reggio philosophy emphasizes tailoring learning to the unique characteristics of each child, rather than adhering to a one-size fits all approach (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). A child-centered approach is a powerful vehicle for democracy in action within the classroom encouraging hands-on learning experiences (Coughlin, 1996); this creates an environment where children can engage with individuals and materials, fostering principles of democracy, including respect for individual rights and voices. Additionally, the learning environment prioritizes competence and creativity over fancy furnishings and expensive toys by offering appropriate materials (Coughlin, 1996). For example, natural materials such as wood and fabric, along with repurposed items such as discarded cardboard boxes and old newspapers, are incorporated to encourage children in exploring and expressing their ideas in various ways.

Building on the transformative impact of the child-centered approach on cognitive development and the fostering of curiosity, educators adopting this philosophy undergo a significant shift in their roles. As facilitators, they delve deep into understanding each child's strengths, interests, and needs. Emerson and Linder (2021) highlighted the importance of recognizing that the title of "RE" is reserved for those residing in Reggio Emilia city, however, educators worldwide can still align themselves as followers, adapters, and inspired by the REA.

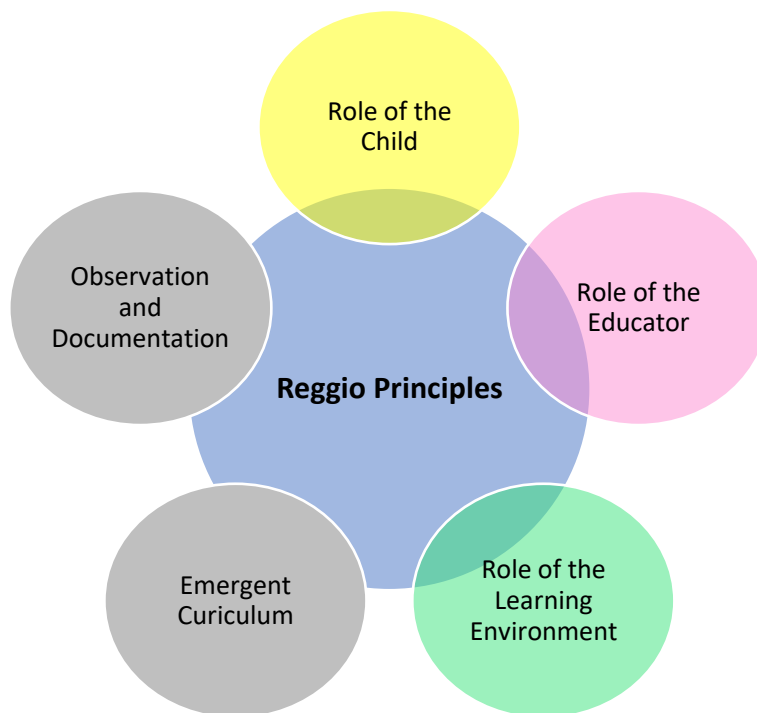
In order to comprehensively grasp the purpose of this approach, educators must embrace the three key principles: the role of the child, educator, and learning environment.

Reggio Emilia Approach: Three Guiding Principles

The REA is guided by several principles including the role of the child, educator, environment, emergent curriculum, and observation and documentation (Figure 1). For the sake of this research project three key principles are essential to discuss the child, educator and learning environment. To develop a keen and practical understanding of the REA, it is crucial to examine three key principles, the child, educator, and learning environment. The following sections describe each principle, highlighting its vital role in shaping children's learning journey.

Figure 1

A Visual of Reggio Principles



Note. The role of the child, educator, and learning environment are the main focus and thus depicted in colour. Observation and documentation as well as emergent curriculum are not the focus of this research paper and thus depicted in grey.

Child

In the context of REA, each child is distinct in how they explore and express themselves, as they seek to engage with their curiosities, interests, and learning hypotheses, drawing upon their prior knowledge of learning; children have the potential to engage in unlimited ways of exploration and learning (Edwards et al., 2011). REA was created to improve human society and to empower children to have some control over their own learning and interest and to recognise their full potential as capable, competent, creative, and active learners (Aljabreen, 2020). REA provides a rich and powerful image of children as capable and unique learners who have strong abilities to investigate and explore knowledge according to their needs (Edwards, 2002). Furthermore, REA acknowledges that children are born with an inherent desire to learn and explore, driven by their unique needs as creative and intelligent individuals (Edwards et al., 2011). Instead of perceiving them solely as egocentric beings who merely engage with objects, the approach emanates constructivist and social constructivist views of children as capable individuals who are competent and ready to connect and establish relationships with their surrounding environment (Santin & Torruella, 2017).

Educator (i.e., Pedagogista)

A pedagogista, Reggio's coined term for the role of what we commonly refer to as educator, is someone who provides children with stimulating suggestions, provokes knowledge, views themselves as partners in children's learning process, and avoids the imposition of the children's learning experiences (Hewett, 2001). The pedagogista's role in REA is to assist children's development in an informal manner, as co-learners, attentive listeners, and facilitators of children's learning process (Edwards, 2002). Pedagogistas are equipped with knowledge to recognize children as competent individuals who actively participate as partners in the learning

journey. They apply divergent thinking to co-construct knowledge and learn with young children in a setting that supports all areas of children's development and allows them to reach their full potential (Aljabreen, 2020). These pedagogical experts see themselves as learners, sharing curiosity and exploration with young children, while also functioning as researchers actively seeking knowledge (Westerberg & Vandermaas, 2021). Pedagogistas play a crucial role in guiding and supporting children's learning experiences by encouraging children to ask questions, nurturing their insights, thoughts, and theories about the world around them. A pedagogista's role is to stimulate curiosity and facilitate a dynamic learning process that values the unique perspectives and inquiries of each child. Though I recognize the importance of the unique role of a pedagogista, for this research, I use the term educator throughout the remainder of the paper to reflect the adult's role in pedagogical practice.

Learning Environment

Philosophically, the REA learning environment serves as a third teacher (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). Childhood is often the first place where we observe how children creatively use their environment (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). This perspective aligns with Manera's (2022) definition in which "learning environments refer to a space that allows connections, fosters curiosities, explorations, and therefore children's sense of agency" (p. 4). REA underscores how a child's engagement with the learning environment provides the initial work for them to develop imaginative thinking, problem-solving skills, and social interactions. An engaging and thought-provoking learning environment, along with a nurturing and stimulating atmosphere, is paramount for supporting children's holistic development, laying the foundation for lifelong growth (Baker, 2018; Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). A rich learning environment stimulates children's innovative thinking by engaging with diverse material, serving as a

fundamental cornerstone for nurturing their learning skills (Aljabreen, 2020). When young children are given access to a stimulating learning environment designed to function as a “third teacher”, it enhances their potential to engage in self-directed learning experiences ignites their imagination (Aljabreen, 2020). Hence, the quality of the learning environment should be carefully crafted to mirror children’s theories of learning, aligning with Reggio principle of providing children with a joyful learning setting (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Reggio Learning Environment with Natural Materials



Note. The image shows a REA learning environment with various natural materials such as pinecones, rocks, and sticks to provoke children’s thinking (Pinterest, 2016).

Figure 3

A Welcoming Reggio Learning Environment



Note. The image displays a welcoming, authentic, and aesthetically pleasing REA learning environment (The Literacy League, 2017).

Related Research

Examining the REA through various perspectives unveil its fundamental principles. In addition, it is encouraging to observe how fellow educators and students are embracing the experiential learning approach in their studies and discoveries. The discussion below presents related studies on REA with a narrative angle, such as a study presented by Blow (2019) sharing how they were inspired by the Reggio approach. Upon critical reflection on establishing a dynamic learning environment, fostering collaboration, and addressing adaptive challenges, the author found profound satisfaction in their role as an educator. Other studies discussed what they learned about the approach, such as Boyd and Bath (2017), where university students indicated a positive attitude toward gaining new knowledge about REA. In this study, students learned the REA is a cooperative method that enables them to evolve as learners, cultivating a sense of

community. They also asserted this approach not only enhances individual learning but also inspires collective collaboration in creating a nurturing and connected learning environment.

Transitioning to practical implications, Hartman's (2007) study discussed that applying the principles of the REA into practice requires educators to change their actions and beliefs regarding children's learning processes. Adopting REA goes beyond just providing clear instructions or demonstrating how to use some of its principles; it involves a commitment to fully utilize this approach in teaching children (Hartman, 2007). For instance, if educators make only surface-level adjustments to RE principles, such as altering content and adapting educational objectives, without implementing substantial and fundamental changes in their practices and beliefs about children's abilities, it is considered an adoption without real implementation (Hartman, 2007). In Boyd and Bath's (2017) study, students enrolled in early years education experienced firsthand the guiding principles of REA. They reflected on what they learned about how the REA fosters collaboration between children and educators, emphasizing the significance of individual ideas and thoughts without establishing a hierarchical knowledge structure. This immersive engagement allowed the students to observe REA as a democratic environment, fostering open conversations and shared responsibility. Within the REA, students learned children actively cooperated with educators to explore new perspectives, challenging their existing knowledge, collectively constructing a deeper understanding of their learning and exploration (Boyd & Bath, 2017).

Baker (2019) reflected on her experience with the REA and what she observed during her visit to Infant-toddler and pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The researcher was moved by their observation in Reggio practice that children were not given instructions on what to do; instead, they were problem solvers who worked collaboratively. Furthermore, Baker noticed

children in REA express themselves in various ways, such as using words, moving, drawing, and building, illustrating a real example of learning together. These diverse forms of expression are referred to as “the hundred languages” (Baker, 2019). In REA, children communicate and develop their intellect through various languages, such as words, movement, drawing, painting, dramatic play, and music, which are collectively known as the “hundred languages” (Edwards et al., 2011; Mitchiner et al., 2018). Beyond conventional reading and writing, this concept embraces a spectrum of symbolic, metaphorical, and imaginative forms of children’s possibilities to learn. Building upon this idea, Blow (2019) discussed that the uniqueness of the REA stems from values and perspectives on the child, making it impossible to replicate with a manual. Implementing the REA involves educators’ understanding of each child’s learning journey, considering how Reggio principles can be tailored to support and enhance each individual’s learning needs (Blow, 2019). In a qualitative exploratory case study done by Gantt (2021), it was found that the hundred languages of children and flexible planning with project work are vital in applying REA. These principles aim to empower children by giving them a voice in their learning, providing the freedom of exploration (Gantt, 2021). This approach is designed to enhance engagement and create opportunities for significant cognitive development. The focus on engagement in the REA extends beyond memorization, aiming to instill a genuine passion for learning and a lifelong curiosity in students (Gantt, 2021). Gantt’s study (2021) cultivates a dynamic learning environment that sparks curiosity and supports cognitive growth. In addition, within REA, the relationships formed between children and educators significantly influence their social and emotional development. Thus, serving as key factors in driving children toward the cultivation of an enriched sense of self-identity and an enhanced understanding of diverse perspectives connected to their surroundings (Gantt, 2021).

Moreover, in their narrative self-study, Blow (2019) delved into their own experiences, employing critical reflection as a method to enhance their comprehension of Reggio-inspired practices. Blow discussed the importance for educators practicing Reggio-inspired approaches to examine their beliefs and values related to children and learning, emphasizing the need for a reflective process. This process should involve a continuous reassessment of knowledge, encouraging educators to regularly revisit and reconsider their beliefs and values in the context of REA. In Reggio-inspired practices, to support children's rights in education, educators must redefine their role, viewing themselves as researchers and critical thinkers rather than mere caretakers or followers of set procedures (Blow, 2019). Building on this, Childress (2020) further contributes insights from their experience as a researcher and educator in a "Reggio-inspired" program. Childress (2020) learned by cultivating relationships and understanding the Reggio philosophy, educators are better equipped to support children's individual learning experiences. It is crucial not only to listen to what children say but also to reflect on their actions, reactions, and interactions with their surroundings to nurture their curiosity and imagination (Childress, 2020).

Expanding on the transformative impact of Reggio principles, Kaynak-Ekici et al. (2021) contribute valuable insights into the role of educators; specifically modifying the physical environment within Reggio-inspired programs. In this study, educators stated that this aspect is crucial, as the 'physical space' has been shown to significantly influence children's cognitive, physical, and social development. The intentional modification of physical space is recognized for its ability to support the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills in children. Additionally, educators stated that curiosity, a key driver of learning, is linked to the happenings in children's surroundings (Kaynak-Ekici et al., 2021). Building upon the

significance of environmental influences on childhood development, a study examining existing literature by Slipp (2017) sheds light on various fundamental principles that underscore the REA to early childhood education. These principles encompass a strong conception of a child, a learning-enriched environment, and recognition of the myriad ways children express themselves, often referred to as the hundred languages of children (Slipp, 2017). These values serve as valuable tools for educators and children, fostering reflection on the ongoing processes of children's learning. Drawing from the researcher's experience in studying the REA, it becomes evident that when a child poses a question, the recommended approach is not to simply provide an answer but to inquire into their thoughts and reasons behind the inquiry. In the analysis of documents from private schools and nurseries in the United Arab Emirates, where teachers are implementing the REA in their classes, the research found this approach views the teacher as a supporter and the child as a leader, fostering active learning and creativity (Alkaabi, 2022). Thus, REA is an innovative approach that allows educators to gain insight into the child's perspective on the world. The optimal learning environment for applying the REA does not follow a singular form of learning style. Instead, it encourages the freedom for children to explore and engage in investigation which foster a comprehensive approach to knowledge acquisition, allowing for personalized learning experiences that cater to individual strengths and preferences (Alkaabi, 2022). Furthermore, fostering an environment that encourages the discovery of children's inner strengths and creative thinking collaboratively can contribute to its effectiveness in supporting each child's unique learning journey (Alkaabi, 2022).

Findings from these studies speak to the significance of narrative self-study as a valuable tool for generating ideas, fostering reflection, and promoting dialogue about teaching practices, facilitating knowledge growth. The principles of REA presented in these studies have opened up

various paths for professional development, providing educators with the opportunity to enhance their understanding of children's learning and develop professionally. Evidently, applying these principles in practice contributes significantly to the creation of a nurturing environment that supports children's learning journeys.

Theory that Influences my Perspective

In my undergraduate studies in the BECE program, particularly in two courses, early childhood education, and the science behind the developing child, I was captivated by Vygotsky's theory of learning and development, specifically the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and its effect on children's learning. ZPD underscores the social nature of learning, highlighting the importance of tailored support and guidance in the learning process (Lantolf, 1994). To effectively support children's learning and development, we as educators should consider their individual needs and interests, observe their emotional engagement during play and exploration, and assess what they gain from these experiences (Vygotsky, 1916). What captivates me is the insight provided by Allal and Pelgrims (2000) regarding Vygotsky's ZPD. According to them, ZPD represents the bridge between a child's typical development and their potential level of development when guided by educators to acquire specific skills. Educators in this context assume a pivotal role as mediators, fostering positive social interactions that enhance children's learning and development. Allal and Pelgrims (2000) elaborated on how Vygotsky's ZPD emphasizes how educators contribute to children's development when they provide them with space to expand their knowledge this involves encouraging meaningful relationships with their surroundings, fostering exploration, and facilitating deeper engagement with learning experiences. Similarly, in the REA, educators play a key role in guiding and supporting children's exploration and discovery.

As a passionate educator who seeks to create rich learning experiences for all children, I find great inspiration from Lantolf's (1994) observations regarding Vygotsky's ZPD. Understanding the concept of ZPD not only informs my teaching philosophy but also guides me in fostering an environment where each child can reach their full potential through individual support for meaningful learning experiences. Vygotsky believed children possess the remarkable ability to master higher-level thinking and developmental skills, transcending their typical daily activities (Lantolf, 1994). This perspective resonates with my belief in the impactful role educators play in unlocking the full potential of each child's learning journey. This social engagement can be applied to children's learning process and problem-solving skills to be ready for real world challenges.

The principles of the REA align closely with Vygotsky's ZPD theory. Both emphasize the social nature of learning, with a focus on the educator's role in supporting children's authentic learning. Collaboration and interaction are central underscoring a shared commitment to meaningful learning experiences through dynamic interactions. Furthermore, the ZPD promotes understanding, critical thinking, and empowers children to take charge of their learning journey. This aligns with Reggio principles recognizing the active role of children, emanating core process in constructivist and social constructivist theories. In this approach, children lead their learning, seeking new knowledge and critical thinking. Both argue that nurturing environment enable children to contribute actively to knowledge construction.

Gap in Literature and Practice

Upon review of various sources, it has come to my attention that there are limited studies addressing educators' understanding of Reggio core principles in the context of Reggio adapted programs. Based on my experience in the field, many educators including myself who work with

young children lack knowledge on the principles of REA. From my work experiences, we as educators were under the impression that observation and documentation were the main aspects of REA. As presented above, some literature exists that explores professional experiences with Reggio principles through narrative inquiry (e.g., Baker, 2019; Blow, 2019). For instance, Blow (2019) used critical reflection to explore personal experiences, emphasizing the importance for educators to examine their beliefs and values related to children and learning through a reflexive process. Baker (2019), in their self-reflective study, was inspired by children's diverse forms of expression (i.e., the hundred languages). In ethnographic research conducted by Boyd and Bath (2017), students in a University-level early years program learned firsthand about the principles of REA and how these principles foster collaboration among children and educators as co-learners. In this study, students reflected on their experiences and asserted the REA is a collaborative method that empowered them to become learners fostering a sense of community. Students learned that children and teachers collaborate as partners in learning, valuing and discussing everyone's perspectives in a non-hierarchical manner promoting open and democratic conversations.

Summary

In this narrative self-study, I critically reflected on my practices in REA and examined the literature to enrich and expand my knowledge of Reggio principles. As an educator who worked many years in the field of early childhood, I have experienced lack of knowledge on the importance of Reggio principles including, the role of the child, educator, and learning environment. From my previous working experiences as an educator in Reggio adapted environments, I was guided to rely on a single principle to represent children's reflective learning. This principle involved only using a pen to write observations and a camera to record

children's play. However, in this paper, I explored the Reggio philosophy beyond this single principle. REA is a collection of values and principles that guide children and educators to have equal roles as investigators, researchers, and co-learners. As a global approach inspiring many educators around the world, it is not surprising to find rich literature that describe this inclusive approach. REA is a unique approach centered equally around three teachers: the child, the educator, and the learning environment (Edwards et al., 2011).

I relied on Vygotsky's ZPD to respond to my research questions. The concept of the ZPD in my perspective is pivotal in learning, as it not only fosters deep comprehension and critical thinking but also empowers children to have control of their own learning journey (Lantolf, 1994). Vygotsky emphasized the notion that children are born with intellectual potential that develops positively through adult's encouragement, collaboration, and engagement, allowing them to freely express themselves in various ways, informing my reflexive process (Stepanović, 2010).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

The purpose of this research was to reflect on my knowledge of and practice in engaging with the three core principles of the REA. I utilized the methodological approach of narrative self-study, focusing on self-analysis of my individual journey, as well as critical friend conversations, heightening the reflective process (Hamilton et al., 2008). Self-study involves personal and interpersonal learning, where collaboration and feedback from others play a crucial role in gaining insights (Samaras & Roberts, 2011). Working with a critical friend not only expands an individual's understanding but also transforms it (Samaras & Roberts, 2011). Collaboration with a critical friend is particularly valuable for fostering honest conversations about one's own practice, leading to the development of new and meaningful insights (Russel & Berry, 2014). Narrative self-study approach is invaluable for cultivating self-awareness, comprehending personal maturation, and enriching knowledge (Hamilton et al., 2008). It is also an effective approach as it elevates the educators' practice, serving as a powerful instrument to engage in research, enhancing their teaching methods and contributing to well-informed choices, continually evolving in their roles (Sewell, 2020). Following this method empowers us to analyze our own educational endeavors, fostering knowledge growth in relation to teaching pedagogies (Duan et al., 2023).

In this study, I embarked on a journey of self-discovery, enabling me to enhance my expertise and contribute more effectively to my field (Hamilton et al., 2008). The accompanying self-reflective practice enabled me to explore the challenges of my work, discover new insights, and refine my approaches. I incorporated my individual observations, perspectives, and findings as I deeply reflect upon restrictive practices. I incorporated critical friend dialogues based on research assistant experience, as self-study has a well-established tradition that involves actively

engaging with a trusted external perspective (Samaras & Roberts, 2011). This critical friend plays a vital role in careful questions and critiques, actively seeking to provide insights into the researcher's experiences (Russel & Berry, 2014). The power of narrative self-study lies in its capacity to enhance skills and self-assurance, enabling me to convey my experiences and stories transparently and genuinely, which can prove valuable to others facing similar challenges (Hamilton et al., 2008). By engaging in this process, my goal was to gain insights and learn from experiences that contribute to my understanding and practice of applying Reggio principles in practice.

I applied critical self-reflection to explore my own lived experiences, gaining a comprehensive understanding of my evolving knowledge of Reggio principles (Son, 2019). Fundamentally, critical self-reflection is a dynamic process that enables individuals to actively shape and refine their professional practices by continuously evaluating and understanding their own beliefs, behaviors, and the dynamics of their professional relationships (Shaw & Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Engaging in critical self-reflection allows individuals to examine their thoughts and feelings, gaining insights and fostering a deeper understanding of their actions (Gale & Schröder, 2014).

Research Plan

My curiosity about the REA main principles grew out of my initial limited knowledge, which was centered on observations and documentation to support children's learning and growth. This curiosity deepened when I began working as a research assistant in 2021, where I engaged in reading and coding various principles embedded in the Reggio pedagogy. During my work on a project related to power dynamics within early childhood educational pedagogical methods, I realized that there are three crucial principles within the Reggio philosophy that

educators must delve into and comprehend for effective learning implementation. This was something I was not knowledgeable of or exposed to in my ECE training or practice. This study allowed me to further investigate this developing knowledge.

The narrative component of this self-study is presented in four personal reflections typed journal-style. These journals represented my thoughts and experiences in four ways, as an ECE, from professional workshops, research experience with REA, and critical friend dialogues. The critical evaluation of these reflections allowed me as the researcher to portray my knowledge of the main principles of REA and how and in what ways it evolved through my research assistant work experience in coding and reading on REA. Engaging in a narrative self-study enabled me to examine and establish connections between my limited experience of the REA in Reggio adapted programs and my ongoing learning journey.

Data Collection

The study consists of three sets of data: (a) personal reflections of my work and professional development, (b) research assistant work experience with coding, and reading literature on REA, and (c) critical friend dialogues. My experience as an educator in Reggio adapted programs, consists of working as an ECE in three different daycare settings with children aged 3-5 years old. In terms of professional development workshops, I attended one professional development workshop annually from 2009 to 2019, these workshops were centered around the preparation of math and literacy materials to enhance children's learning. They were hosted by ECEs from services for children. My research work experience involved coding and reading various principles in the pedagogy of REA, over the course of two years (2021-2023). I worked on reading of REA, analyzing, and coding for a project on power in early childhood education pedagogical approaches. Throughout my academic journey in the BECE program and

my master's studies, I had the privilege of working closely with my critical friend, who is also my supervisor. I chose my critical friend based on our collaborative experience during my role as a research assistant, our shared passion for the early childhood field, and my inspiration from her profound understanding of the REA. This foundation of mutual respect and shared interest fostered an environment where I felt comfortable engaging in open discussions about my experiences and cognitive dissonance.

I recorded data by writing my thoughts for each experience in through retrospective reflection, as an ECE, research assistant, and critical friend dialogue. In my journal writing, I documented thoughts and experiences of my encounters with REA. The content of the journals displayed what I experienced throughout my eleven years (2009-2020) of working and engaging in ongoing training as an educator in Reggio adapted programs, my work as a research assistant, as well as incorporating conversations and engagement with my supervisor and critical friend, Dr. Sandra Della Porta, to interrogating my experiences and understanding the dilemmas with application of the REA. Reflections were written separately, representing four categories (a) my work experience in Reggio adapted programs as an ECE with limited knowledge on the main principles; (b) professional development workshops that I attended; (c) my research assistant work experience with coding and reading on REA; (d) critical friend dialogues. The goal is to learn from past experiences, understand the core principles better, and improve future adaptation of this approach.

Analysis

Reflections

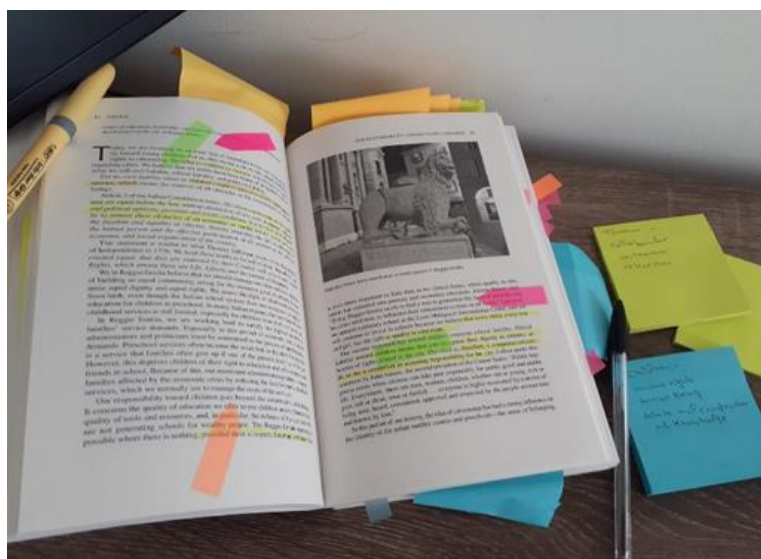
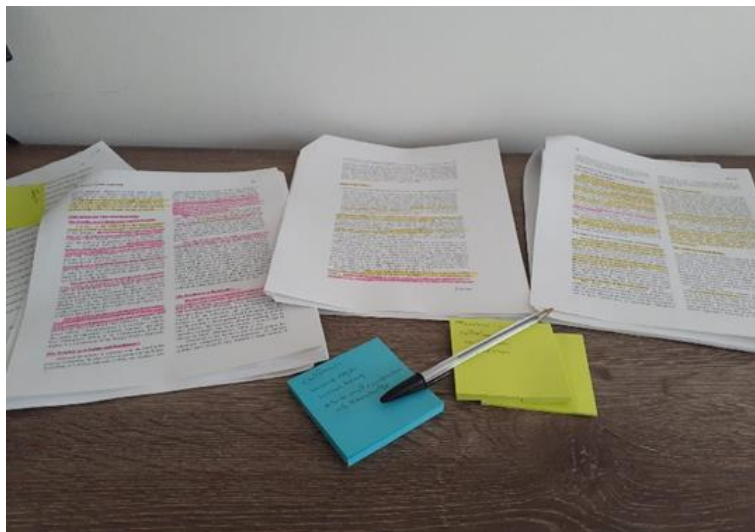
I intended to practice critical self-reflection by thinking back on my work experiences in Reggio adapted programs and my perspective on Reggio principles. Critical reflection is the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one's experience within a broad context of issues (Hamilton et al., 2008). To support this analysis, I utilized my journal of documented practices and perspectives as a tool for self-reflection. This helped me identify gaps in my understanding of Reggio main principles during my learning journey and recognize and consider related thoughts that may arise during the process. Furthermore, the reading on REA from research experience explained the Reggio principles, thereby fostering a more comprehensive and detailed analysis, enriching my understanding of this approach.

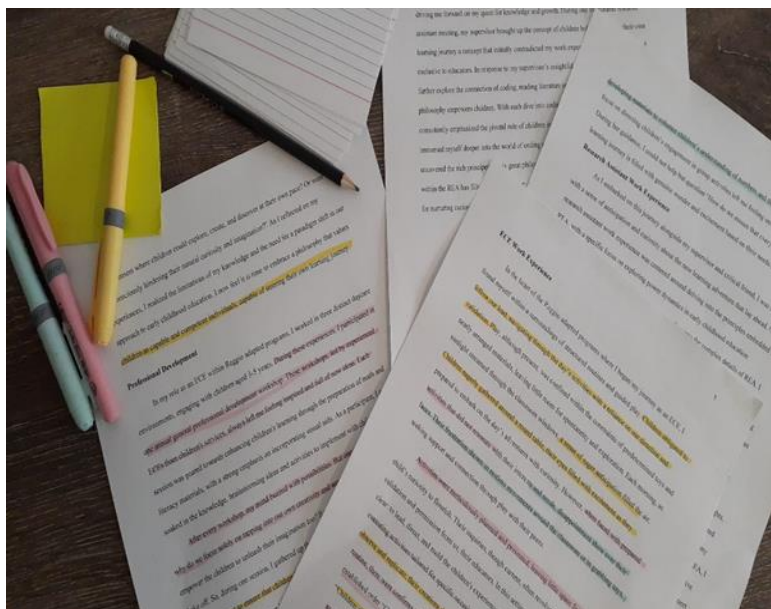
Building on this reflective process, I organized my reflections on work experience in Reggio adapted programs, professional development workshops, and research experience through a priori qualitative thematic analysis (Elliott, 2018). These reflections were organized based on pre-identified themes that focus on the role of the child, educator, and learning environment. The a priori approach is commonly referred to as a deductive approach of analysis. The a priori thematic analysis should be created in relation to the main research question(s) that the researcher would like to investigate to accelerate their initial analysis (Elliott, 2018). In my analysis, I highlighted what represents the role of the child, educator, and learning environment by relying on the use of colour coded highlighting. I highlighted what represents the child's role in each reflection with yellow, what represents educator's role in each reflection with pink, what represents environment's role in each reflection with green (Figure 3). After each reflection is

highlighted in the colours representing each a priori code, I reviewed, critically reflected upon, and wrote a summary report on the findings.

Figure 4

Manual Color Coding





Note: Manual color coding in yellow represents the role of the child, in pink the educator, and in green the learning environment.

Linear Thinking

After reflections have been organized by code category, I analyzed the findings in a linear thinking approach. Linear thinking is an approach that offers researchers the advantage of broadening their insights and facilitating a deeper understanding of an issue (Shahbaznezhadfar & Yousefi, 2022). This approach suggests that creating particular knowledge involves elements working together in a step-by-step manner. It implies a structured, organized process where each element contributes to generating specific knowledge (Shahbaznezhadfar & Yousefi, 2022). Furthermore, utilizing a linear thinking approach will not only reflect my genuine learning path but will also assist me in identifying gaps in my previous knowledge and practices as an ECE in Reggio adapted environments, or even present gaps or further ponderings. To implement the linear thinking approach, I worked within three distinct themes: child, educator, and the learning environment. Each of these themes served as a focal point for my analysis. I meticulously

examined and compared my personal experiences in a sequential manner with the information presented in the literature that I have gathered during my work as a research assistant, and I included critical friend dialogues. Linear thinking enriches our understanding of literary works, character development, and personal growth by bridging the gap between our thoughts and the contemplative aspects of literature, resulting in efficiency in knowledge gain (Shahbaznezhadfar & Yousefi, 2022). Employing linear thinking proves advantageous by linking the predetermined themes with literature (Jiayi, 2019). This approach clarifies and ensures that ideas are presented in a comprehensible and organized manner (Jiayi, 2019).

By engaging in critical self-reflection, I delved into my experiences and reevaluate my perspective on Reggio principles. This approach helped me to analyze themes of child, educator, and learning environment by drawing parallels between my experiences as an ECE in Reggio adapted programs and insights gained from my work as a research assistant, which involved coding and reading on RE. This analysis aimed to deepen my understanding of the child's role in their own learning experience. It assisted me in exploring the educator's role in REA and its impact on children's learning and growth. Lastly, the linear thinking approach supported me in examining the learning environment as a third teacher to enhance children's learning. This analytical approach sought to reveal knowledge gaps between my Reggio adapted program experiences and research assistant insights, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of Reggio principles and enhancing my professional capacity.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study followed a qualitative design and applied a linear approach to analysis. The narrative self-study is carried through three journal-style personal critical reflections. The study consisted of three sets of data, (a) personal reflection of my work and professional development; (b) research assistant work experience with coding and reading literature on REA; (c) critical friend dialogues. Presented below is an overview of my experience as an ECE in the classroom and in professional development workshops, as well as a research assistant. Following this is a description of my interpretation of the REA from ECE to research assistant, organized into three broad themes: the child, educator, and learning environment.

In reflecting on my journey within Reggio adapted programs as an ECE, I observed that children, educators, and the learning environment each held key significance in shaping my experiences. My journey within Reggio adapted programs began in 2009 and extended until 2020, encompassing various experiences that contributed to my knowledge. This reflection revealed a journey filled with both challenges and learning opportunities as they will be presented below. My decision to leave the field was a difficult one, yet I could not ignore the transformative impact of my experiences within the Reggio adapted program. They marked the beginning of a new chapter filled with fresh perspectives and growth opportunities. Despite the challenges and discomforts encountered, I found great value in the insights gained and lessons learned.

In my role as an ECE within Reggio adapted programs, I worked in three distinct daycare environments, engaging with children aged 3-5 years. During these experiences, I participated in one general professional development workshop related to math and literacy each year from 2009-2020. Some of these workshops, led by experienced ECEs from children's services, left me

inspired and full of new ideas on teaching these two concepts. Reflecting on my professional development, each workshop I attended centered on only two concepts math and literacy as *the* means for all children's learning journey. This experience inspired me to seek out ways to support children's learning with engaging and enjoyable ideas, but it also constrained me to provide a singular and similar learning experience for all children.

In reflecting on my journey as a research assistant alongside my supervisor, who also is my critical friend, I am reminded of the interconnected role of the child, educator, and learning environment within early childhood education. From December 2021 to August 2023, my work centered on delving into the principles of the REA, particularly in understanding power dynamics in early childhood education pedagogy. This exploration demanded a deep dive into REA main principles, as I was required to realize their implications. With each research session, I struggled with the complexities of ensuring the principles I read were not only understood but also make a connection with what I observed in Reggio adapted environment. As I delved into literature, I encountered challenges navigating the balance between theory and practice. Each challenge provoked me to reflect on how to effectively translate research findings into meaningful action for the benefit of children and educators. This process of dealing with obstacles not only deepened my understanding and fueled my determination to learn more on REA but also pushed me towards further exploration of its main principles for a positive impact on children's learning journey. This understanding drove me to reconnect with my roots as an ECE in Reggio adapted programs, stimulating a decision to delve deeper into that world. Reflecting on this exciting journey of discovery, each reading and coding session dedicated to REA revealed new explorations of its main principles, providing valuable insights into children's learning processes within this approach.

In my role as a research assistant, my interactions with my critical friend deeply shaped my understanding of REA and its implications for the child, educator, and learning environment. Through scholarly exploration and discussions centered on REA principles, I gained insights into the dynamic roles of children and educators within this approach. My critical friend's guidance stimulated inquiries into children's agency in learning, leading me to reflect on how educators can empower children to take an active role in their educational journey. These discussions also underscored the importance of the learning environment in facilitating meaningful experiences. Additionally, it allowed me to delve deep into how children are seen as individuals with rights rather than just needs (Rouse, 2023). It also shows that in REA, children are granted autonomy in determining what and how they learn, taking on the role of respected citizens and young researchers (Vodopivec, 2012).

The excitement I felt about my findings allowed me to fully immerse myself in research work experience to explore and learn more. My critical friend supported my exploration by acknowledging the importance of understanding the child's role. I felt encouraged to progress further in understanding the child in the eyes of REA. However, my critical friend suggested additional exploration of coding and reading on REA to enhance my journey in this approach. In another meeting, they suggested considering how educators and the learning environment contribute to this dynamic. Despite making initial progress in understanding REA, I recognized the importance of further examining how these elements contribute to children's learning experiences. Based on the recommendation of my critical friend, I engaged with more readings to enhance our discussion. It was a great reminder for me to understand that in REA, educators actively promote rich social interactions among children (Britto et al., 2018; Lanphear & Vandermaas, 2017). Before each meeting, I would conduct additional reading and coding on

each principle I was assigned to investigate. Our collaboration became a shared journey of discovery on REA. Through thought-provoking queries from my critical friend, I found myself delving deeper into REA principles.

The Child

Structure vs. Spontaneity

In the early stages of my journey, particularly in 2009, I found myself engaged in similar roles across two different settings. In these two settings I worked alongside experienced educators who played a central leadership role, I observed the implementation of traditional teaching methods, characterized by structured routines and predetermined activities for children. Reflecting on these observations prompted me to question the balance between structure and spontaneity in fostering children's learning and development, highlighting the importance of flexible pedagogical approach. Despite my dedication to the field, I encountered challenges in finding my passion in this role. In 2010, an opportunity arose in a different place to join a Reggio adapted program, sparking excitement and eagerness within me. As I observed myself in this new environment, I found myself continuously reflecting on the relationship between children, educators, and the learning environment. It became evident that each interaction with children was arranged within the educator's schedule, underscoring the structured nature of the learning setting. This observation prompted me to deeply consider the uncomfortable balance between structure and spontaneity in nurturing children's growth and development within the Reggio adapted environment. As I reflected on the structure and guided play that characterized the program, I wondered how these elements interconnected with moments of spontaneous exploration and discovery, essential for fostering creativity and critical thinking in children's learners. This observation led me to think on how to create a dynamic learning environment

where both structure and spontaneity can harmoniously support each child's unique journey of discovery and development. Nevertheless, I encountered challenges in creating changes within the Reggio adapted environment due to the constraints of program guidelines. This tension between my aspirations for innovation and the practical limitations of the program underscored the complexity inherent in promoting meaningful learning experiences within structured settings.

My observations within the ECE setting revealed a consistent pattern of children following our guidance and validation in their daily activities. Despite the structured nature of the environment, challenges arose when activities did not align with children's interests, leading to disengagement. Emphasis was placed on planning activities based on available toys and materials, with educators directing and shaping children's experiences. This approach often involved leading children through adult led activities, displayed on bulletin boards to track achievements. While this approach aimed to provide guidance and structure, it became a central challenge in my role as an ECE to foster learning environments that encourage child-led exploration. My main concern was how providing materials for learning based only on their availability might hinder children from discovering their true needs or interests in learning. I worried that our actions might unintentionally limit their opportunities for exploration and navigating new knowledge.

Furthermore, throughout professional development workshops, the focus was on enhancing children's learning, particularly in math and literacy, through prepared activities and visual aids. As an enthusiastic participant, I eagerly absorbed the knowledge, brainstorming ideas to implement with the children. However, I faced with the challenge of inclusivity, struggling to adapt activities to suit the diverse needs of all children. After every workshop, various possibilities emerged in my mind, a mix of excitement and fear as I examined the potential

changes and challenges ahead. But one question remained “Why do we focus solely on tapping into our own creativity and wealth of knowledge? Why not allow the children to release their imagination too?”. This query emphasized a fundamental tension between educator-centered approaches and the desire to empower children as active agents in their learning journey. Furthermore, the visits from supervisors served as a reminder to translate workshop learnings into action, particularly in creating enriching learning spaces and materials. These reflections prompted me to critically examine the balance between structured learning experiences and opportunities for child-led exploration, indicating my evolving perspective on early childhood education. This required me to adapt my actions and plans to meet her expectations, even if they did not align with children’s needs. I felt uncomfortable with my supervisor focus on leading and directing children’s engagement in one group activity. This prompted conflicting thoughts regarding how such a singular approach could effectively support the diverse learning and exploration needs of each individual child. As an ECE, I understand that children are unique, curious individuals, each seeking various opportunities for their own learning. During these moments, I experienced concern “How can we ensure that every child’s learning journey is filled with genuine wonder and excitement?”.

Repetition vs. Authenticity

As I reflected on my journey in the ECE field, I realized that each experience, observation, and thought contributed to my lack of understanding of the REA main principles. Typically, my days unfolded in a repetitive manner, with preplanned activities aimed at supporting learning experiences for all children. Educators were encouraged to refer back to a big binder containing old plan sheets to replicate plans and ideas as needed. Navigating the diverse needs and interests of each child presented ongoing challenges. Additionally, I observed

how children often sought validation from their educators by asking questions and participating in their play and activities. The phrases such “Children, tidy up your mess before we go to the gym,” kept the learning environment organised. In this structured routine, feelings of discomfort and wonder emerged for me as I questioned whether children were truly able to explore, create, and discover at their own pace. My experience in a Reggio adapted program, which leaned more towards teacher-led activities rather than solely child-led learning, prompted me to think of alternative structures where educators, including myself, could better facilitate the nurturing of children’s natural curiosity and imagination. These thoughts often dissipated due to the scheduled routine and limited understanding of the children role and their environment. However, these moments served as reminders for me on how to balance structure and spontaneity in my role as an ECE within the Reggio adapted environment. I experienced mixed feelings of regret and agreement about my work as an ECE, regret for not voicing my discomfort sooner, but also agreement for aligning with those shaping and leading the learning environment.

Of similar concern and as experienced in professional development workshops, children’s role focuses on learning two key concepts, math and literacy. This is evident through their engagement with pre-designed activities centered around these concepts. Children often await their educators’ preparation for learning experiences on specific occasions, replicating their work as a means of learning. This reliance on educators to structure their learning experiences positions children as followers, actively seeking knowledge and guidance. Their learning process was characterized by observation and imitation, closely following educators’ lead and instructions. However, I found that my thoughts and feelings of dependency and reliance on external guidance may restrict children’s independence in learning and diminish their capacity for exploration. While professional development workshops aimed to guide children’s learning

experiences in math and literacy, as an educator, I felt the need for a balance between teaching specific concepts and fostering autonomy based on Reggio principles. Thus, in this study, it was vital to explore the three main guiding principles in REA that provide children with the freedom to choose what to learn and explore, allowing for *authentic* meaningful experiences.

Observation and Documentation

In my role, each educator was assigned to conduct observation and documentation every two weeks. We were instructed to observe and document a selected group of children during their playtime, engaging them with a few questions and capturing photographs for display on the bulletin board. Discomfort was experienced during this process, particularly when children inquired about their turn to have their picture taken for sharing with their friends. Selecting a group for observation and documentation presented challenges; sometimes, the chosen group of children would simply hold onto a toy, leaving little to document. However, despite the challenges and discomforts encountered during observation and documentation tasks, each interaction with the children provided valuable insights into their individual personalities and developmental journey. For instance, while engaging in structured activities, I noticed moments where children appeared hesitant or disengaged, struggling to express their ideas freely. These observations sparked concerns about whether the stiff framework of the activities restrained their creativity and autonomy. Additionally, I found myself questioning whether our observation and documentation methods effectively captured the richness of their experiences and expressions, worrying that we might miss vital details on children's learning process.

Restrictions of Time

One final experience that I encountered was the presence of a displayed clock, which became a symbol of transition. Its function was to signal the end of playtime and prompt children to transition to the next activity, thereby enabling other peers to access the space. However, this interruption of their flow sparked discomfort within me. Witnessing children hesitantly leave their play for others' turns forced me to delve deeper into my practices within the Reggio adapted program. Reflecting on this, I realized that the presence of the displayed clock, while serving a practical purpose, disrupted the natural flow of children's play and exploration. It prompted me to reconsider the ways in which we structure transitions in the learning environment. I found myself unable to explore alternative methods that could respect children's autonomy and facilitate smoother transitions between activities. This experience highlighted the importance of creating learning environment that prioritize children's agency and uninterrupted engagement in their learning experiences. Furthermore, this realization emphasized my deep concern about not limiting children's learning and exploration with constraints of time, as I strongly believe in allowing them the freedom to immerse themselves fully in their learning journey. Time should serve as a tool to facilitate their growth and discovery, not as a boundary hindering their curiosity and learning potential.

Learning Curve: Overreliance on Educators vs. Child Agency

In Reggio adapted programs, children's engagement in structured play is closely guided by educators, who provide explicit instructions and predetermined routines for their play. For instance, children may seek validation from educators for their actions, such as, "If I clean up, can I go to the gym?" In my opinion, this reliance on educators for direction and validation positions children as listeners and followers within the learning environment. As an educator, I

deeply feel that children's consistent reliance on educator guidance limits their opportunities for spontaneous exploration and self-directed learning. I believe such limitations could hinder their development of critical thinking skills and curiosity, aspects that I consider fundamental for their holistic growth and lifelong learning. While this structured approach may offer benefits in terms of orderliness and facilitation of specific learning objectives, it also raises questions about its impact on children's autonomy, creativity, and exploration based on Reggio principles. In recent learning, I came to understand that the heart of REA is empowering children's role, by providing them with various opportunities for unique learning experiences, yet structured environments can restrict their ability to fully explore and enjoy the learning process.

During a research assistant meeting, as my supervisor and critical friend discussed the concept of children holding power in their learning journey, I was inspired to explore further the relationship between coding and reading on REA principles. This led me to examine how this philosophy prioritizes children's agency and autonomy in their learning experiences. Through my readings on REA, I explored that children possess the capability to identify their own needs and are most receptive to learning when provided with their needs and interest (Edwards et al., 2011; Holmes, 2017). Additionally, the concept of "hundred languages" encouraged me to reflect on the various ways children able to communicate and express their ideas (Senent et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in my exploration on REA as a research assistant, I understood that children possess unique learning capabilities and are active participants in their own learning journey (Edwards et al., 2011; Holmes, 2017; Senent et al., 2021). Rather than being seen as empty vessels waiting to be filled with information, children are acknowledged as ready and capable learners, especially when provided with enriching learning opportunities tailored to their

individual needs (Holmes, 2017). I strongly resonate with the concept of the “hundred languages,” which highlights the diverse ways in which children can communicate and express their ideas (Senent et al., 2021). Moreover, I deeply believe in the REA and their emphasis on the crucial role of children as active, competent learners who lead their own learning experiences (Senent et al., 2021). This recognition of children’s agency and autonomy empowers them to explore and investigate knowledge in meaningful ways, shaping their learning journey according to their interests and curiosities (Edwards et al., 2011). For instance, children may engage in various forms of expression, such as art, music, and storytelling, to communicate their understanding and thoughts (Edwards et al., 2011). As I delved deeper into reading on children in REA, I found myself reflecting on my own limited practices in Reggio adapted programs. According to the REA, children’s learning occurs when they are at the center of their learning process. This challenges traditional notions of teaching and learning, which often revolve around educators and their capabilities. By placing children at the center of the learning process, their learning will foster curiosity, creativity, and collaboration, where every child’s voice is valued and celebrated.

Stemming from engagement with my critical friend and related readings, it was clear that in the context of REA, children are viewed as individuals with inherent rights, rather than solely as individuals with needs to be met (Rouse, 2023). This perspective underscores a fundamental shift in how children are perceived, recognizing their agency and autonomy in the learning process. Within the REA framework, children are granted significant autonomy in determining both the content and the method of their learning experiences. They are empowered to explore their interests, make choices, and engage in self-directed inquiry, thus, holding the role of respected citizens and young researchers (Vodopivec, 2012). This emphasis on children’s

autonomy and agency reflects a deep commitment to fostering principles of respect and partnership within the learning environment. By valuing children as active participants in their own learning, the REA encourages a collaborative approach where educators and children co-construct knowledge and learning. This dynamic relationship not only enriches children's learning experiences but also nurtures their responsibility, laying the foundation for lifelong learning skills.

The Educator

Leading vs. Listening

In my ECE work experiences, educators had various roles, guiding, directing, and leading children within structured routines and guided play. There was an emphasis on educators planning activities based on available toys and materials, with educators directing and shaping children's experiences. This approach often involved leading children through directed activities, which were displayed on bulletin boards to track their achievements. As an educator in Reggio adapted programs, my days often followed a repetitive pattern as activities were preplanned for the children.

Employing phrases like "Children, clean up your messy play area" was a way to teach children a sense of organization in the learning environment. As educators we felt that this emphasis on orderliness aimed to support our role in conducting observation and documentation every two weeks, where children followed predetermined routines, allowing us to easily observe and document their learning experience. Our main goal was to prioritize completing our work, as we were constrained by time to observe and display children's work for others. Each educator was tasked with observing and documenting a chosen group of children during their playtime,

engaging them through a few questions, and capturing photographs for display on the bulletin board. These practices not only facilitated structured learning experiences but also limited our engagement with children, as they followed predetermined routines to observe and document their learning experience.

Professional development workshops guided educators to tap into their wealth of knowledge and creativity, enabling activities to be designed and the learning environment to be decorated for specific occasions, with the aim of guiding children's learning based on the materials prepared for them. The workshops stressed educators' creativity and teaching capabilities, emphasizing their ability to teach based on their individual interests and knowledge. Furthermore, the workshops placed emphasis on the educator's role as a leader, with a focus on the creation of materials specific to math and literacy, tailored to children's predetermined learning journey. As educators, our role in shaping children's learning experiences is significant, yet I believe that the limitations of our active involvement and the focus on our own interests, as well as the design of similar learning activities, prompted reflection on how we unconsciously restrict children's opportunities for exploration and constructing their own learning experience. As a passionate ECE who believes in supporting children's active role in their learning, recognizing, and addressing these limitations is crucial for creating more dynamic and inclusive learning environments based on the REA, empowering children to thrive in their unique learning journey.

Learning Curve: To Listen is to be Curious

Engagement with my critical friend, and recommended readings filled me with curiosity and eagerness to learn more about more principles in this approach. The more coding and reading on the REA I conducted, the more curiosity and knowledge arose, leading me to delve deeper

into further exploration of this rich approach. This time, the reading focused on the complexities of my role as an educator and how it relates to supporting children's learning. Immersed in the details of the REA, I questioned myself about the nature of my interactions with children, the dynamics of the learning environment I create, and the ways in which I can best support their individual learning journeys. This deep dive enabled me to reflect on my journey as an ECE and strengthen the connections between theory and practice within this approach. Within the Reggio framework, I observed that educators encompass various roles, such as partners and observers in children's learning journey, equipped with the knowledge to view children as potent, capable, and resilient individuals (Schoenaker, 2017). In the context of REA, I found that educators' primary role is to continually listen to children to guide and support their individual learning journey (Murphy et al., 2011). While the traditional top-down teaching methods t rely on external researchers, I found that REA educators see themselves as active and primary sources of research, directly contributing insights to extend children's learning experiences (Valentine, 2006).

As a research assistant, I learned that within the REA, educators hold various roles that extend beyond traditional teaching concept. They are viewed as partners and observers in children's learning journey, equipped with the understanding that children are inherently capable and resilient individuals (Schoenaker, 2017). Central to the REA philosophy is the concept of educators as facilitators who prioritize *listening* and responsiveness to children's voices, guiding and supporting their unique learning paths (Murphy et al., 2011). Unlike conventional teaching approaches, which often rely on external experts for guidance, educators in REA have an active role as researchers capable of creating various learning experiences tailored to meet the needs and abilities of each child (Valentine, 2006). In REA educators actively contribute insights and

knowledge gained through observation and reflection, enriching children's learning experiences and extending their understanding of the world (Valentine, 2006). Through this approach, educators not only foster a dynamic and responsive learning environment but also empower children to become active participants in their own education, driving forward their learning journey with curiosity and agency (Edwards et al., 2011).

Engaging with my critical friend, I realized that our role as educators not only enhances children's learning experiences but also supports cognitive development (Britto et al., 2018; Lanphear & Vandermaas, 2017). This includes fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and providing opportunities for self-expression (Britto et al., 2018; Lanphear & Vandermaas, 2017). I understood that learning is not something educators do for children, but rather an engaging process in which children actively participate through their inquiries and explorations (Brandao & Theodotou, 2020; Hewett, 2001).

What I have also learned from my engagement with my critical friend was that within the REA, educators play an active role in fostering rich social interactions among children, recognizing that these interactions are vital not only in enhancing their learning experiences but also in supporting cognitive development (Britto et al., 2018; Lanphear & Vandermaas, 2017). One of educators' complex role is to create learning opportunities that promote collaboration for children to engage in critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-expression, thus facilitating holistic development (Britto et al., 2018; Lanphear & Vandermaas, 2017). Important to the REA philosophy is the belief that learning is not a passive process where educators provide knowledge to children; rather, it is an engaging and dynamic journey in which children actively participate through their inquiries and explorations (Brandao & Theodotou, 2020; Hewett, 2001). Educators play a crucial role in encouraging children to pursue their interests and curiosity, and empower

them to take ownership of their learning, fostering agency and autonomy. The REA emphasizes the important role of educators to create inclusive learning opportunity where children are valued as competent and capable learners (Edwards et al., 2011). Through meaningful social interactions among educators and children such as hands-on experiences, children not only acquire knowledge and skills but also develop critical thinking abilities, problem-solving skills, and strengthen their self-confidence.

The Learning Environment

Limits vs. Opportunities

In my experience as an ECE, with Reggio adapted programs, the learning environment played limited role in shaping children's learning. The structure was evident in the set routines and planned activities, with the environment experiencing bi-weekly changes based on educator choices from available materials. While this system aimed to guide children's learning experiences, it mainly functioned in a passive role for the learning environment rather than an active to support children's learning exploration. Although, the educators' role was to plan activities to engage children, the environment did not actively contribute to this process. Instead, it served as a supportive space for activities to occur smoothly rather than facilitating children's exploration of their curiosity. Additionally, the presence of rules aimed at maintaining orderliness, such as the directive phrase "tidy up your mess," reinforced the limited nature of the environment to influence children's learning journey. Furthermore, the displayed clock in each classroom functioned more as a tool for structuring time rather than actively engaging children in their learning process. Thus, while the learning environment in Reggio adapted programs provided a framework for learning experiences, its role remained limited in children's learning journey.

In addition, within the framework of my professional development workshops, as educators, we strongly believed that shaping the learning environment as a stage for children's learning is crucial for supporting their learning journey. We considered this to be a fundamental aspect of our approach to fostering effective learning experiences. The environment incorporates materials specifically designed by educators to facilitate learning in areas such as math and literacy. Furthermore, the activities designed by educators in this learning environment ensured similar learning opportunities for all children to experience. As an educator in Reggio adapted programs, navigating the limited role of the learning environment is integral to my professional development journey. While I sought to create an engaging and stimulating learning environment, I recognized the challenges presented by constraints such as materials, time, including children as active participants in choosing their own learning interests and management roles in leading and facilitating. However, I viewed these limitations as opportunities for growth and innovation. I decided to pursue further education and knowledge through this learning journey to fully understand REA main principles, as learning environment is one of them, for my own professional growth and to benefit others who have experienced similar challenges. Reflecting on my previous experiences in a structured learning environment with limited exposure to learning concepts, this research journey has allowed me to explore more knowledge on the Reggio learning environment that my practices lacked exposure to.

Learning Curve: Space to Engage

As a research assistant, the discussions about reading and coding continued with my critical friend, and this time their question was, "How does the learning space connect to children's learning and development?", prompting further exploration into the relationship between the physical environment and learning outcomes in REA. I returned to search for more

reading materials to analyze, further reflecting my curiosity about the Reggio learning environment. I realized that the Reggio learning environment shows a deep respect for the rights, interests, and needs of children who inhabit these spaces (New, 1998; Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). It was important to remember that crafting a learning environment that functions as a “third teacher” stresses a change from constant guidance by educators, allowing children for self-directed learning opportunities (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). Moreover, I found that when considering the environment, our distinctive focus is on its visible elements (Strong-Wilson & Ellies, 2007). I observed that the practice of coding and exploring literature within the REA contributed to a deeper understanding of the principles of this approach and facilitated stronger connections between them. Engaging in this practice has grown a commitment to continuous learning and development, fostering ongoing reflection on past teaching experiences. Collaborative discussions with my supervisor who is also my critical friend have sparked new ideas and furthered my understanding and growth in this approach. This opportunity provided a space for open inquiry and expression of thoughts.

The fundamental aspect of this philosophy is the notion of the environment as the “third teacher”, indicating a shift away from the traditional role of educators as the sole leaders to encourage children to lead their own learning journey and to experience their own needs and curiosity (Edwards et al., 2011). While the visible elements of the environment, such as materials and aesthetics, are significant, the REA acknowledges that the environment encompasses more than mere appearances. It considering how things are experienced from a child’s perspective, focusing on the sensory and emotional aspects of the environment (Strong-Wilson & Ellies, 2007). The REA views the learning environment as a dynamic and interactive space that plays a crucial role in shaping children’s experiences and fostering their growth and development. By

prioritizing the creation of environments that honor children's agency and curiosity, the REA seeks to encourage learning spaces where children feel empowered to explore, create, and learn according to their own interests.

Feeling motivated by my critical friend's encouragement, I delved deeper into REA, searching for unique aspects of their learning environment. As a naturally curious person, I found myself drawn into the readings and felt a sense of excitement as I connected with a theory of learning. It furthered my knowledge to read that in REA, the learning environment exhibits freedom instead of a strict definition of space, allowing for spontaneous and boundless exploration among children (Robson, 2016). Contrasting spaces designed only for functionality in my previous experiences, priority is given to creating areas within the Reggio environment that facilitate connections, free exploration, and creative investigation for children (Valentine, 2006). To further explore REA, I included readings on Bronfenbrenner (1986), which emphasized the crucial significance of the child's environment, highlighting that it is far more than a mere setting. It is a great reminder for us as educators, that the dynamic interplay between the child and their surroundings goes beyond a passive setting, with the child not only influencing the environment but also being equally shaped by it (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

As highlighted in discussions with my critical friend, the REA prioritizes a learning environment characterized by autonomy and flexibility, rather than constrained settings, to support children's limitless ways of discovery (Robson, 2016). Unlike learning spaces designed solely for functionality, the REA emphasizes the creation of learning environments that foster connections, free exploration, and creative investigation for children (Valentine, 2006). This contrasts with the traditional perception of the learning environment where I worked, which places sole responsibility on educators (Strong-Wilson & Ellies, 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1986)

further underscores the pivotal significance of the child's learning environment, emphasizing that it goes beyond mere physical settings. According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), the dynamic interplay between the child and their learning environment extends beyond passive interaction, with the child not only influencing the environment but also being shaped by it. From this reflection, I realized how REA transforms our understanding of the learning environment, emphasizing its role as a dynamic space that actively engages children in their learning process. By recognizing the relationship between children and their learning environment, the REA inspires educators to create learning environments that ignite curiosity, foster exploration, and empower children to become active agents in their own learning journey.

Summary

The chapter presented a description of my interpretation of the REA from ECE to research assistant, organized into three themes separated by three headings: the child, educator, and learning environment. Based on the ECE experience in the Reggio adapted program, children were followers and listeners, while educators acted as sole leaders within a predetermined learning environment, preparing materials and toys every two weeks to facilitate the children's learning. The professional development workshops focused on teaching children math and literacy, which were designed by educators to be creative within a predetermined learning environment for children to follow and replicate. The research work experience in coding and reading on REA, presented various examples on child, educator, and learning environment. For example, children are creative, competent, and capable of constructing their own learning experience through collaboration and interaction with others in their surroundings (Edwards et al., 2011). In REA, educators are partners and keen observers in children's learning, with great knowledge of children as powerful, capable, and resilient individuals (Schoenaker,

2017). In REA, the learning environment acts as a “third teacher” to support children in fostering self-directed learning experiences (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). Lastly, the critical friend engages in dialogues, discussions, suggests reading on REA, and provides feedback guided toward understanding and practical application of REA principles. Their insightful inquiries provoked a reflective journey as I carefully considered the complexities of their questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to reassess my exposure to REA main principles to explore my interpretation of REA for the role of the child, educator, and learning environment based on my learning experiences, from early childhood educator to research assistant. The research questions that guided this research were:

- 1- What is my interpretation of Reggio Emilia approach for the role of the child, educator, and the learning environment based on my experience, from early childhood educator to research assistant in early childhood education?
- 2- How might this critical engagement with the REA impact my professional capacity in ECE?

Through a narrative self-study, I conducted critical self-reflection on my experience as an ECE, professional development workshops, and a research assistant. This was followed by a description of my interpretation of the REA from ECE to research assistant, organized into three themes: the child, educator, and learning environment. In this chapter, I present a summary, discussion, limitations, implications, future research, and a conclusion.

Summary

In this qualitative study, I employed a narrative self-study, which places significant emphasis on self-reflection and one's personal journey (Hamilton et al., 2008). This approach is highly valuable for enhancing self-awareness, comprehending personal growth, and contributing to the broader knowledge base across various practice domains (Hamilton et al., 2008). Self-study follows a long-standing tradition that entails actively involving oneself with a reliable external perspective such as a critical friend (Russel & Berry, 2014). This essential companion plays a crucial role in posing thoughtful questions and critiques, actively striving to offer

valuable insights into one's experiences (Russel & Berry, 2014). Through a narrative self-study, I conducted critical self-reflection on my experience as an ECE, professional development workshops, and a research assistant, followed by a description of my interpretation of the REA from ECE to research assistant, organized into three themes: the child, educator, and learning environment.

In this chapter I discuss findings to gain a comprehensive understanding of REA main principles, I incorporated an analysis of the data in the context of Vygotsky's theoretical principles, particularly his theory of learning and development, known as the ZPD. The ZPD underscores the role of social interactions in enhancing children's cognitive and learning abilities (Stepanović, 2010). This theory suggests that children possess inherent intellectual potential that flourishes through adult encouragement and engagement in their learning journey. The ZPD delves into how adult support and guidance contributes to children's development, inspiring them to explore and investigate more in their learning experiences (Allal & Pelgrims, 2000). Utilizing the ZPD in this research is pivotal because it underscores the educator's role as a co-learner and facilitator, fostering children's curiosity and exploration in learning.

My Interpretation of the REA

In this section, I structured the discussion of my interpretation of the REA from ECE to research assistant into three areas: the child, educator, and learning environment, in order to address my first research question "What is my interpretation of the Reggio Emilia approach for the role of the child, educator, and learning environment based on my experience, from ECE to research assistant in early childhood education?"

The Child

In the Reggio adapted programs where I worked as an ECE, structured routines and guided play are central for children's discovery. However, my observations have revealed a significant difference between this structured play and the natural curiosity of the children. Despite children's eager anticipation each morning, excitement often turns to disappointment as the activities provided fail to align with their interests and needs. Children's disappointment becomes evident through restless movements or seeking relief in play with their peers. However, within the confines of this environment, children's innate inclination to take charge of their learning experiences is often restrained. In Reggio adapted programs, children have limited roles, primarily as listeners and followers, with others guiding and leading their learning according to their needs and interests. Children's ability to express themselves fully and explore their interests seems confined within predetermined boundaries. These observations raise questions about how well the environment supports children's developmental needs or unintentionally controls their innate curiosity and imagination. It underscores the importance of enabling children to actively shape their learning experiences, rather than passively receiving predetermined activities.

In the realm of my professional development workshops, children's learning experiences are significantly shaped within structured directives in math and literacy workshops crafted by professional educators. Despite the potential for fostering imagination and creativity, the structured nature of these directives seems to employ a considerable influence on children's experiences. There's a notable disconnect between the prescribed activities and the natural preference of children for exploration and wonder. Within this structured environment, children find their roles constrained by the overarching focus on predetermined learning goals. The workshops, while aiming to impart essential math and literacy concepts, unconsciously limit

children's opportunities for autonomous expression. Their experiences become confined within the boundaries set by educators, leaving little room for them to pursue their unique interests and inquiries. Instead of fostering curiosity and individual exploration, the structured nature of the workshops leaves children with restricted options. As a result, their experiences seem confined within the boundaries set by educators, limiting their ability to fully engage with and internalize the concepts being taught. Thus, the child's role within this framework becomes recipient of structured learning, rather than an active participant in shaping their own learning journey. This observation highlights the importance of reconsidering how structured directives are implemented to prevent autonomy and self-expression among children. Empowering children to take a more active role in their learning process is crucial for promoting meaningful engagement and lifelong learning skills.

In contrast to these practices, the research assistant experience through coding and reading on REA revealed that the REA fundamentally centers on the belief that children are inherently capable and creative individuals, exploring the enormous realms of knowledge through what is metaphorically referred to as the "hundred languages" (Senent et al., 2021). This symbolic concept embodies the idea that each child possesses a myriad of ways to express themselves, encompassing art, movement, paint, music, and more (Baker, 2019). Within this pedagogical framework, educators not only acknowledge the "hundred languages" but actively cultivate and document this diverse range of learning process, creating a dynamic and enriching environment tailored to each child's unique needs and interests (Baker, 2019). Collaborating closely with the children, educators play a pivotal role in supporting them to explore and articulate their ideas in a multitude of ways, fostering a holistic and personalized approach to learning. The REA plays a crucial role in empowering children's learning experiences and

encourages more collaboration among educators and children, tightly connecting them with the learning environment for enhanced learning outcomes (Boyd & Bath, 2017).

What made my research coding and reading interesting was the provoking questions from my critical friend. In one incident, my critical friend asked me about children's power in learning, "Do children share power with educators in the learning process"? This question opened my eyes, prompting a review of my teaching practice, revealing a lack of empowerment for the children; they seemed powerless. Determined to delve deeper, I explored literature on the REA, discovering many interesting insights into how children can share their own learning journey with educators. It was encouraging to read about how this approach also empowers children to become inquisitive young researchers, eager to uncover answers to their own theories and hypotheses through dialogues with adults in their environment (Kim & Darling, 2009). This approach expands the traditional role of educators beyond mere teaching, transforming them into facilitators and collaborators in the children's learning journey.

Moreover, throughout my journey of exploring children's role and agency in their learning, my critical friend played a crucial role in deepening my understanding. From our initial discussions, where they encouraged me to delve into literature on this topic, to our regular meetings, where I expanded upon my exploration of children's role in the REA, their insights and perspectives helped me to shape my understanding on these principles. Their probing questions and constructive feedback have challenged me to critically examine my teaching practices, where children were often viewed as powerless agents in their own learning. As highlighted by Rouse (2023), children are perceived not only as individuals with needs but also as individuals with rights. In the REA, children are granted a voice in their learning and the freedom of exploration to meet their needs (Gantt, 2021). Further exploration led me to

Vodopivec (2012) reading that indicated within the REA, children are afforded autonomy in deciding both the content and method of their learning, thereby assuming the role of respected citizens and young researchers. My critical friend's questions and constructive feedback challenged me to critically examine my teaching practices on how we considered children as powerless agency. Moreover, our ongoing dialogue has provided valuable opportunities for mutual learning and growth as we navigate the complexities of empowering children and reshaping traditional educational dynamics through the application of the REA main principles.

Unfortunately, my practical experiences were led in a philosophy that placed educators in control of children's theories of learning, portraying them as passive recipients rather than embracing agency in their learning journey. Malaguzzi, the developer of REA, firmly believed in the uniqueness of each child's individuality and their capacity to construct their own learning based on their interests and curiosity (Vodopivec, 2012). In this approach, Malaguzzi underscored the role of three key educators in a child's learning journey, one of them is the child as the primary teacher (Edwards et al., 2011). Malaguzzi aimed to empower children's role as a teacher and active agents, giving them full control over their learning and guiding their exploration based on personal interests. The difference between this foundational principle of the child's role and the observed practices in Reggio adapted programs where I worked highlights a significant gap, underscoring the need for a more faithful implementation of the REA to truly empower children as active and inquisitive learners. While reading about the REA in my research experience, I encountered the significance of educators actively seeking genuine insights into Reggio principles, especially when dedicated to fostering children's learning. Empowering children to take on the roles of leaders and co-learners in their educational journey not only enriches their learning and developmental progress but also fosters a culture of

exploration and knowledge growth. This belief is integral to fostering children as naturally curious and capable individuals, fully equipped to explore and investigate their unique learning hypotheses through various means, which in turn helps them become active, involved, and responsible members of our community (Hewett, 2001). Embracing this perspective allows for the development of captivating learning experiences customized to meet the individual needs of each child.

In the REA, learning based on relationships considers both the social context and the content of learning, aiming to construct new connections between ideas, enrich knowledge, and reflect the complexities of the real and imaginary worlds. This approach acknowledges that even children are drawn to significant ideas rather than small ones (Edwards, 1995). Malaguzzi emphasized the importance of a child developing through interactions with others rather than in isolation. Therefore, the Reggio philosophy centers on fostering and maintaining relationships between children and their educators (Biermeier, 2015). From the very beginning of life, children naturally seek to understand themselves, others, and the world through interactions, creating shared knowledge. Learning should focus on viewing the child not in isolation but as connected to others (Edwards, 1995). To establish a learning community, children and educators must engage in dialogue and collaborative knowledge construction. Relationships should not be limited by timeframe or context; instead, they should consist of consistent connections and friendships to enhance a unique learning experience for both (Edwards, 1995). Fundamentally, the REA not only values the exchange of ideas within a social context but also recognizes the enduring nature of these relationships, essential for cultivating a rich and continuous learning journey for children and educators.

The Educator

Within the context of Reggio adapted programs, my role as an ECE was shaped by a sense of constraint, where the role of an educator felt more similar to that of a director rather than a facilitator of learning. This constraint had significant implications for the children's experiences within the learning environment. Activities within the program were meticulously planned and presented by educators, leaving little room for the natural emergence of children's interests and inquiries. The educators' daily rhythm seemed to echo with directives, urging children to follow predetermined schedules and activities. This regimented approach, dictated by educators, limited the spontaneity and freedom essential for authentic learning experiences to unfold naturally. Furthermore, educators had considerable control over the learning environment, relying on the wall clock to dictate when activities began and ended. This emphasis on strict schedules and predetermined agendas diminished from the core principles of the REA, which emphasize the importance of child-led learning and the role of educators as facilitators rather than directors. Moreover, my practice within the Reggio adapted program was limited in its application of the principles of REA. While observation and documentation are integral aspects of this philosophy, relying solely on this practice without incorporating other essential principles, such as the child role and importance of the environment as the third teacher or the value of collaboration, resulted in an incomplete implementation of the REA. The observations conducted within this constrained practice were guided by a predetermined agenda, focusing on specific groups of children every two weeks. Despite attempts to support learning and curiosity through documentation, the pervasive sense of control overshadowed the potential for children to authentically explore and create. In conclusion, my limited practice within the Reggio adapted program had significant implications for children's experiences within the learning environment.

By adhering too rigidly to predetermined schedules and directives, there was a missed opportunity to foster the natural curiosity and creativity inherent in children. There is a need for a more balanced approach that embraces the core principles of the REA while allowing for flexibility and spontaneity in children's learning experiences.

In the realm of professional development workshops within Reggio adapted programs, the role of the educator emerges as pivotal yet constrained, particularly in fostering children's autonomy and creativity. Despite sessions led by experienced ECEs aimed at enhancing children's learning through math and literacy materials, there is a significant gap in empowering children within these structured environments. The workshops, while informative, lack strategies for educators to effectively nurture children's imagination and autonomy. Responses from presenters deflect inquiries about fostering creativity, highlighting a systemic discomfort with deviating from traditional directives and structures. This response is echoed by supervisors, who emphasize directing children's engagement in group activities rather than supporting individual learning journeys. This discrepancy underscores the limited role of educators in empowering children within Reggio adapted programs. Despite the emphasis on educator creativity, there is a need to refocus on facilitating children as active participants in their learning process. Educators must advocate for pedagogical approaches that prioritize children's autonomy and creativity. Professional development workshops must equip educators with strategies to inspire creativity while providing practical guidance on fostering children's autonomy.

The research assistant experience enabled me to realize that children need educators to prioritize active engagement in their learning process rather than solely focusing on the final product. When adopting this approach, we are not only recognizing and affirming the vital role that children play in shaping their unique learning journeys, but we also actively support and

facilitate their active participation, ensuring a more personalized and impactful educational experience. This collaborative and dynamic interaction between educators and children fosters an environment where curiosity thrives, leading to a more meaningful and comprehensive learning experience. Moreover, as educators our role should extend beyond mere observation and documentation; children require our interactions to stimulate their ideas and thoughts, enabling them to delve deeper into their own explorations (Edwards et al., 2011). Aligned with the REA on recognizing children as social beings and capable learners who construct their own knowledge (Harris, 2021), educators prioritize active engagement by providing various learning opportunities through a provocative learning environment. This approach encourages and employs children's endless potential for learning and exploration, aligning with the philosophy of prioritizing the learning process over the final product. Educators consistently need to participate in observation and dialogue to inquire and enhance children's learning theories, thereby boosting and expanding children's play and curiosity as a means to foster their own interest in learning. The role of educators in the REA is unique, complex and responsive to the changing times and needs of children. Educators in REA do not consider their role to be easy, but rather as an ongoing process of learning and development. They engage in extended mutual criticism and self-examination of their teaching behavior, seeing themselves as learning best through communication, conflict, and co-action, similar to how they believe children learn (Edwards et al., 2011). The REA enables educators to gain insight into the child's perspective, thoughts, and ideas regarding explorations of the world (Alkaabi, 2022). Educators not only listen to what children say but also support their actions and interactions with their surroundings to nurture their curiosity and imagination (Childress, 2020).

In Reggio adapted programs where I worked as an educator for eleven years, educators' role was in presenting their authority over children as the sole leaders possessing knowledge and the capability to lead and apply their own theories of learning. However, this approach restricted children's ability to thrive in learning based on their own interests, as it confined them to specific and limited areas of knowledge that did not support their overall learning growth. As I delved deeper into the core principles of REA, I became aware of the limitations that educators have when it comes to adopting such a powerful approach. When educators apply the leadership role this leads children to depend on others to define their interests and ultimately lead them to develop the knowledge and interests of others. Without a doubt, this practice will hinder children's enthusiasm for exploration, investigation, and the creativity of learning and discovery. Furthermore, it can limit their social interactions, affect their tendency to explore, and reduce their inherent motivation to learn (Kahveci, 2023).

Contrary to my experiences as an ECE, through my research assistant experience, I explored how REA is not intended for educators to directly impart instructions to children. Rather, it functions as a comprehensive framework that empowers educators to understand the complexities of how children learn and actively engage in the exploration of their own knowledge acquisition (Brandao & Theodotou, 2020). The REA is not merely about providing directions and applying principles; it demands educators' commitment to fully utilize this approach in supporting children's learning (Hartman, 2007). Implementing the principles of the REA into practical ways requires educators to adapt their pedagogy and beliefs regarding children as capable individuals (Hartman, 2007). This highlights that REA is a facilitative learning tool, encouraging educators to act as learning partners, fostering an environment where children can independently discover, connect, and construct their understanding of the world.

This approach underlines the importance of nurturing a child's innate curiosity and promoting a self-directed learning journey. Within the REA, educators embrace a complex role, serving as facilitators, researchers, and co-constructors of learning in a collaborative environment. In discussions with my critical friend, they shared insightful readings that highlighted the importance of educators facilitating authentic learning experiences for children. Schoenaker (2017) emphasized the role of creativity, investigation, and imagination in children's learning, while Murphy et al. (2011) stressed the significance of educators listening to guide individual learning journey. Additionally, Harris (2021) underscored the REA focus on attentive listening and creating supportive environments for children to lead their learning. These readings have further deepened my understanding of the educator's role in empowering children within Reggio adapted programs.

I am grateful for the invaluable guidance and insightful dialogues provided by my critical friend, which have significantly enriched my understanding. Their guidance prompted me to delve deeper into additional readings on the educator's role within the REA framework, thereby enhancing the depth of our ongoing discussions. Within the REA framework, educators are described as active facilitators, dedicated to fostering rich social interactions among children. This approach not only enhances children's learning experiences but also nurtures cognitive development, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and avenues for self-expression (Britto et al., 2018; Lanphear & Vandermaas, 2017). It underscores that learning is far from a passive process where educators merely convey information to children; instead, it is an interactive journey where children actively participate through inquiry and exploration (Brandao & Theodotou, 2020; Hewett, 2001).

In line with these principles, as highlighted by Harris (2021), the REA provides educators with the pedagogy of active listening, fostering the development of a democratic and nurturing space that empowers children to take the lead in shaping their own learning experiences. By adapting Reggio principles, which emphasize rich social interactions, we can nurture children's cognitive and socioemotional development, making their insights, thoughts, and learning ideas visible as they continue to flourish and grow on their learning journey. Educators need to believe in the limitless learning potential of children and provide a conducive learning environment that empowers them to investigate and explore their wonders and curiosities, and facilitating their unique learning journey (Edwards et al., 2011). Building upon this foundation, Malaguzzi highlights a unique role for educators in the REA. They guide learning and advocate for an inclusive environment that respects all children's needs, emphasizing honesty and engagement to honor children's rights as citizens (Routledge, n.d.). True engagement, in the REA context, involves dialogue and discourse about children's learning, highlighting collaborative creation and evolution of experiences through active participation and cooperation between children and educators (Routledge, n.d.). In addition, in this approach the role of educators as keen learners and researchers shifts away from traditional approaches of being an expert who simply imparts knowledge (Edwards, 2015). Educators believe that children can formulate hypotheses, construct theories, and discern when to seek collaboration and assistance to address any challenges they may face (Edwards, 2015).

I was inspired by Vygotsky's theory of learning and development, with a special focus on the ZPD. Vygotsky's theory highlights how children's cognitive and learning skills are shaped by their social interactions with adults (Shabani et al., 2010). Children have inherent intellectual potential that flourishes when they are encouraged, collaborate with adults, and engage freely in

play. Drawing from Vygotsky (1916), effective support for children's learning involves considering their interests, emotions during exploration, and self-discovery. When educators become co-learners with children, their own learning takes on creative forms, as Marginson and Dang (2017) confirm. Allal and Pelgrims (2000) examined Vygotsky's ZPD which investigates how educators can enhance children's development by encouraging deeper exploration in their learning experiences. In the ZPD, children thrive when they actively engage and collaborate with educators, who serve as co-learners, sharing and exploring knowledge with them. In the ZPD, adults become supporters, facilitators, and guides for children's play and learning, motivating them to push their boundaries. Furthermore, Shabani (2016) explains that interactions with educators lead to developmental changes in children. The ZPD empowers children and educators to construct their learning through these interactions. Additionally, the ZPD provides insights into children's cognitive capabilities and learning needs, serving as an informal assessment tool to expand their curiosity and knowledge (Allal & Pelgrims, 2000).

The Learning Environment

From my ECE experiences in reflecting on the learning environment dynamics within Reggio adapted programs, the clock on the wall in each classroom emerges as a silent yet powerful symbol of the structured routines that govern the daily activities. While the intention behind its presence is to instill a sense of structure and routine, it also subtly imposes constraints on the freedom of children to explore and create at their own pace. The classroom environment, although rich with materials and opportunities, often feels confined by the rigid expectations inherent in Reggio adapted programs. Activities are meticulously designed by educators, based solely on their own creative inspirations rather than the genuine interests and needs of the children. This approach can inadvertently restrain children's autonomy and creativity, as they are

expected to replicate predetermined activities rather than discover and pursue their own interests. Moreover, the structured nature of the day, regulated by the ticking of the clock, further reinforces this constraint on children's freedom. They are pushed from one activity to another, with little time for spontaneous exploration or deep engagement with their surroundings. While the intention may be to support growth and development, this structured approach can limit the potential for children to engage in meaningful, self-directed exploration and discovery. This discussion prompts critical reflection on the balance between structure and freedom within educational settings. While structure is important for providing a sense of stability and routine, it is essential to ensure that it does not overshadow the need for children to have agency in their own learning process. Embracing a more flexible approach that allows for spontaneity and autonomy can create opportunities for deeper engagement, curiosity-driven exploration, and meaningful learning experiences for children. Educators must strive to strike a balance between structure and freedom, recognizing the importance of providing children with opportunities for self-directed exploration and discovery. By fostering an environment that values children's autonomy and creativity, we can create more enriching and empowering learning experiences that support their holistic development.

Reflecting on the annual professional development workshops within the context of the learning environment, a sense of rigidity and conformity becomes apparent. Despite intentions to enrich children's learning experiences, particularly in areas such as math and literacy, there is a noticeable lack of flexibility in accommodating their diverse interests and learning styles. The learning environment, while well-intentioned in its efforts to support children's learning, seems to prioritize the attainment of predetermined curriculum objectives over the organic emergence of children's creativity and imagination. Activities and resources presented during workshops

often revolve around structured approaches to teaching concepts such as counting numbers and memorizing the alphabet in various ways. While these activities may have educational value, they tend to overlook the individualized needs and interests of the children. This reliance on structured activities and predetermined curriculum objectives underscores the need for a more responsive and child-centered approach to designing learning environment. Instead of focusing solely on meeting standardized goals, educators should prioritize creating environments that honor each child's unique journey of discovery. This led to embracing flexibility and adaptability, allowing for the natural development of children's interests and creativity within the learning space. It is essential for professional development workshops to emphasize the importance of responsive and child-centered approaches to designing their own learning environments. Educators should be encouraged to consider the diverse interests, learning styles, and developmental needs of children when planning activities and organizing the physical space. By adopting a more flexible learning environments that foster genuine engagement, curiosity, exploration learning experience become more enjoyable for all children.

In contrast to a traditional pre-prepared learning environment, I learned through my journey as a research assistant that the REA stands out as a unique method that recognizes and addresses the limitations of such settings. Traditional approaches may not meet the diverse interests of children, impeding their natural curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge to uncover their own theories of learning. In contrast, the Reggio learning environment is meticulously designed to shape each child's identity and purpose, fostering active engagement, communication, and the expression of values through play (Kaye, 2016). In the REA, the physical space is recognized as provoking children's curiosity and supporting their critical thinking and problem-solving (Kaynak-Ekici et al., 2021). One of educators' roles is to establish

a dynamic learning environment, foster collaboration, and address adaptive challenges as they arise within the learning setting (Blow, 2019). When I was discussing the theme of the learning environment with my critical friend she suggested that I delve into Jobb (2019) and Strong-Wilson and Ellies (2007) to grasp the role of the learning environment. Jobb (2019) highlights the significance of the learning environment as a source of meaning, belonging, and identity, which is influenced by the relationships cultivated within it. According to Strong-Wilson and Ellies (2007), while our focus often centers on the visible elements of the environment, such as its physical appearance, in REA it encompasses more than meets the eye. They argue that true understanding involves considering how things are experienced from a child's perspective, emphasizing the emotional and sensory aspects rather than purely visual observations. The insights provided by my critical friend played a pivotal role in reshaping my perspective, particularly in exploring the dynamics of the learning environment in the REA.

The encouragement from my critical friend prompted me to delve deeper into the unique aspects of the learning environment fostered by REA. As someone naturally inclined towards curiosity, I found myself engrossed in the readings, experiencing an evident of excitement as I began to connect with the underlying theories of learning. One vital feature of the REA learning environment is its emphasis on freedom rather than strict and constrained learning spaces. This allows for spontaneous and boundless exploration among children (Robson, 2016). In contrast to traditional spaces primarily designed for functionality, REA prioritizes creating learning environment that foster connections, free exploration, and creative investigation for children (Valentine, 2006). Bronfenbrenner (1986) underscores the importance of recognizing the child's environment as more than just a physical setting. He emphasizes that it encompasses dynamic interactions between the child and their surroundings, suggesting that the environment is not

passive but rather actively influences and is influenced by the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). It is important to realize that REA challenges traditional notions of learning environment by advocating for spaces that empower children to actively engage with their surroundings. This approach not only enriches our understanding but also underscores the dynamic relationship between children and their environment, as highlighted by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Through our discussions, my critical friend played as a guiding, offering valuable reflections and challenging me to delve deeper into how educators facilitate learning within the Reggio context.

The Reggio learning environment has earned recognition for its ability to cultivate children's learning, blending aesthetics with intellectual engagement. It demonstrates a deep respect for the rights, interests, and needs of children who inhabit these spaces (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018; New, 1998). Crafting Reggio learning environment that functions as a "third teacher" stresses a change from constant, allowing children for self-directed learning opportunities (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). This transformative approach not only addresses the limitations of traditional settings but also provides a rich and dynamic context for children to explore, create, and construct their understanding of the world.

Building upon Edward et al. (2011) insight, I find importance in Loris Malaguzzi's analogy that likens the learning environment to a game of ping pong. This comparison underscores the vital role of dynamic interaction between educators and children, similar to the active engagement required between players and their environment in a game of ping pong. Malaguzzi's emphasis on mutual contribution for optimal growth and learning aligns with my belief that as educators our role is not merely instructional but collaborative. It highlights the importance of fostering an environment where both educators and children actively participate,

contributing to a rich and vibrant learning experience. Just as in ping pong, where the game flourishes with the joint efforts of players, the learning process flourishes when both educators and children actively contribute to the learning dynamic (Edward et al., 2011). Extending my exploration into the importance of the learning environment as a dynamic player in the learning process, as discussed by Malaguzzi (1993) and Strong-Wilson and Ellies (2007) who elaborated on how the learning environment within the realm of this approach functions as a vital pedagogical influence. This environment serves as a third teacher, not only facilitating the development of adaptable and constructive relationships between children and their surroundings but also actively nurturing their unique interests. I believe in designing the environment as the “third teacher”, the intention is to create a space that not only provides children with opportunities to explore their interests but also actively encourages them to cultivate meaningful connections to the sense of place and identity within their surroundings.

In this approach, the learning environment encourages uninterrupted play and work periods for children, enabling them to concentrate on their exploration and make individual choices based on their interests to enhance their creativity and critical thinking skills (Alkudhair, 2014). Moreover, when educators encourage extended periods of uninterrupted time, it promotes the development of problem-solving skills, which are crucial for generating new ideas (Alkudhair, 2014). In addition, collaboration and the encouragement of open-ended questions further enhance children’s creative process. This approach recognizes the environment as a dynamic and influential component in the learning process, shaping a context where children can engage, discover, and construct a deep understanding of their needs and their environment. Based on Brandao and Theodotou (2020) within the RE context, the learning environment extends beyond the observable, aiming to mirror not only what is perceivable by children but

also their emotions and creative thoughts. It is crucial to recognize how children are naturally inclined to create their own world of learning when they interact with provocative materials in their supportive environment. This interaction promotes their sense of belonging and encourages them to explore and build relationships with their surroundings. The learning environment should thus be designed to support children's autonomy, social connections, discovery, and the fulfillment of their individual learning needs. In the REA, the environment allows each child to express themselves for their own development and knowledge construction (Arseven, 2014). Finally, the insights provided by my critical friend played a pivotal role in reshaping my perspective, particularly in exploring the dynamics of the learning environment in the REA. Through our discussions, my critical friend played as a guiding, offering valuable reflections and challenging me to delve deeper into how educators facilitate learning within the Reggio context.

My Professional Capacity in ECE

To answer my second research question “How might this critical engagement with the REA impact my professional capacity in ECE?”, I delved deeper into the three main principles of the REA, exploring their significance for the role of the child, educator, and learning environment. Throughout this process, it became evident that this critical understanding significantly shaped my knowledge of this approach, offering valuable insights into the limited perspectives and practices employed by educators in Reggio adapted programs. Having explored the reflective implications of the main principles of REA on the child, educator, and learning environment, it is significant to consider how this critical engagement has influenced my professional capacity in ECE. Reflecting on my engagement with these principles, it becomes evident that they deeply impact my professional capacity in the early childhood education field. Through critical engagement, I experienced a transformative learning process that significantly

enhanced my knowledge and practical skills in applying REA principles to create revolutionary learning experiences for each child. By focusing on specific principles such as the child, educator, and learning environment, I gained a deeper understanding of how children actively contribute to their own learning process, with educators providing support as co-constructors and researchers in the learning environment, which serves as a provocation for children's exploration. This understanding, in turn, informed and enriched my pedagogical approach, enabling me to recognize and facilitate children's unique perspectives and interests more effectively according to their individual needs. Moreover, critical engagement with REA sharpened my decision-making skills by emphasizing responsiveness to children's needs and interests, leading to the creation of a more dynamic and personalized learning environment. The collaborative principles of REA supported an environment where educators and children were encouraged to collaborate as learners and knowledge navigators to create joyful learning experiences. Although I did not directly participate in collaboration, this environment significantly enhanced my ability to understand how effective collaboration with colleagues and meaningful engagement with children have a vital positive impact on children's learning experiences. Furthermore, critical engagement highlighted the importance of the learning environment in providing materials that provoke curiosity and exploration, with the goal of empowering children as active participants in their learning journey. This enhanced my awareness of how REA considers the learning environment as a third teacher, emphasizing its crucial role alongside educators and peers in shaping children's learning experience. Understanding the learning environment as a third teacher emphasized the significance of its role in providing learning opportunities and supporting children's development.

Overall, critical engagement with REA principles, the child, educator and learning environment, not only allowed me to reflect critically on my previous practice in Reggio adapted programs with limited exposure to REA main principles, but also served as a spark for ongoing growth and development. It equipped me with the necessary tools and insights to navigate evolving experiences, contributing to the creation of meaningful and enriching learning experiences for children while continually enhancing my professional capacity in future career.

Limitations

The goal of this study was to expand my knowledge as an educator working with young children and integrate these rich principles easily into my classroom setting to empower children's learning. There are several possible limitations in this study. First, the use of narrative self-studies in research poses a challenge due to its dual nature, functioning both as an objective documentation and subjective interpretations of personal experiences (Copeland, 2019). This dual nature raises concerns about the reliability and generalizability of using personal accounts for research as the continuous discussions and debates can lead to changing meanings, making narratives unstable and difficult to define, even if they seem consistent (Copeland, 2019). To minimize this challenge, I revisited my reflections to ensure consistency and stability in the narratives, explicitly recognize this and account for it when presenting findings and discussion.

Second, one possible limitation of incorporating a critical friend dialogue into methodology could be the concern felt by the new researcher about being judged by an experienced expert, such as a critical friend with extensive experience in the field of learning (Russel & Berry, 2014). To address this limitation, it was helpful to encourage open communication, emphasize a collaborative approach, and foster a sense of mutual learning with

my critical friend. These steps helped address my concerns, as a new researcher, about being judged by a more experienced critical friend.

Third, this study is limited to one educator's experience within Reggio adapted programs. It is essential to acknowledge that the practices and insights presented are not universally applicable across all Reggio adapted settings. The study is shaped by the constraints associated with the educational level of the ECE, typically a college diploma. This educational background may impose limitations on the depth of understanding of RE principles. While I have approached the study with an open mind and a commitment to unbiased exploration, it is essential to recognize that my perspective is influenced by my positionality. To address this limitation, I took into account and was conscious of my positionality when engaged in analysis.

Fourth, despite the presence of valuable literature in the English language, other languages may have been missed due to the English language restriction. Finally, I limited myself to reading REA from only one specific work experience as a research assistant. To address these concerns, I broadened my sources of information in the discussion by incorporating insights from a diverse range of literature on Reggio principles.

By transparently addressing these above-mentioned limitations, I aimed to provide the reader with a keen understanding of the contextualized nature of this study. Through this transparency, I encourage readers to carefully assess how the findings can be applied considering the specific educational context and potential bias from my professional background.

Implications

The implications of my study begin with the aspiration to broaden my limited exposure to the main Reggio principles. These principles aim to facilitate a highly individualize learning

journey for each child as a unique and capable learner. I undertook this study as I recognized the necessity for improvement in the practices of educators including myself who work in Reggio adapted programs. If educators are afforded the opportunity to participate in proper professional development through associations that accurately present the Reggio principles, they will come to appreciate, comprehend, and be better equipped to work with the core beliefs of this rich and powerful approach. I believe that my study underscores the need for improvements in the practices of educators working with young children in programs that incorporate Reggio principles into their framework. Furthermore, I suggest for educators to engage in comprehensive exploration and discussions with their management regarding additional training in this effective approach that aims to provide both children and educators with more opportunities to engage in shared learning experiences. My study carries implications for rectifying the limited understanding that educators often apply in Reggio adapted programs, which may narrowly focus on principles of observation and documentation. I firmly believe that knowledge alone is insufficient for one to become an effective educator, rather, its practical application is essential.

The examination of the three core principles within the REA reveals that it is not confined to a single principle; instead, it comprises three vital ones: the role of the child, educator, and learning environment. Specifically, if educators adhere to these three fundamental principles, early childhood learning will benefit, enabling children to thrive and release their creativity in their own learning endeavors. Moreover, these principles will enable educators to view themselves as learners, researchers, and facilitators in children's learning journey, rather than following the traditional role as authority leaders with limited insight into how children learn and explore. These three crucial principles can have a positive impact on early childhood learning and create a balanced role for both children and educators in a stimulating environment

that respects the unique and boundless ways in which children learn and express their creativity, guided by their own individual interests. Lastly, I suggest that the adaptability of this unique approach should be a collaborative effort among educators from various programs that adapt the REA, providing support through mentoring and peer networks.

Future Research

Additional investigations in the realm of Reggio adapted practices should delve deeper into educators' personal experiences and narratives, especially those related to their challenges in understanding and implementing the three core principles of REA. Collecting and sharing their reflections will undoubtedly contribute to increased awareness of the pressing need for a transformation in learning Reggio pedagogy in the early years. This exploration will further empower educators to expand their understanding of this invaluable philosophy, which is widely employed to enhance children's learning journey and overall development. By gathering more stories and experiences from educators, we can foster a community of lifelong learners who continuously evolve their practices to better serve the needs of the children they educate. Future research could also explore the qualifications of educators and supervisors working in Reggio adapted programs, particularly regarding their depth of knowledge and understanding of REA. It may be beneficial to investigate whether there is a need for more specialized hiring processes, with specific requirements for knowledge and experience, especially in programs that follow rich and powerful approaches such as REA. By examining the qualifications of those leading such programs, we can better understand how to support the implementation of effective and impactful educational practices such as REA. Moreover, in addition to examining the qualifications of educators and supervisors, it is essential to explore the ongoing professional development opportunities available to them. Understanding the alignment of these training

initiatives with the principles of REA can provide valuable insights into enhancing the quality of education in Reggio adapted programs. By ensuring that educators and supervisors receive continuous professional growth opportunities that exceed their initial qualifications, we can better support the effective implementation of learning practices such as REA that foster children's holistic development.

Concluding Reflections

This research journey, with the help of my critical friend who is also my supervisor, has been a deeply personal and transformative experience, providing me with a deep dive into the principles of REA and prompting reflection on my growth as an educator and researcher. Moving from my role as an early childhood educator to that of a research assistant in early childhood education, the exploration of REA has proven to be enlightening and enriching. Loris Malaguzzi's impact on REA cannot be overstated, with his innovative practices and philosophical foundations reshaping my perspectives on the roles of children, educators, and the learning environment. Through collaborative discussions and reflective conversations with my critical friend, I gained a deeper understanding of the REA philosophy. Their constructive critiques and suggestions have empowered me on how to apply these principles effectively.

Within this approach, children emerge as dynamic learners actively shaping their own educational paths, guided and supported by educators within a nurturing and creative learning environment. Employing narrative self-study as my research methodology allowed me to reflect on the evolution of my understanding of Reggio principles. Combining my field experiences with an in-depth exploration of relevant literature revealed that REA is not a mere collection of isolated principles but rather a harmonious interplay of three core elements working to craft unique learning experiences for each child. In the REA, children are celebrated as capable,

curious, creative, and active learners expressing their needs through various channels. They assume the role of teachers in their learning journey, determining what they want to learn based on individual interests. Their innate curiosity propels them to ask questions, transforming into researchers and investigators in pursuit of answers to their learning theories. For educators, the REA demands a complex role where they need to be partners, researchers, and facilitators in children's learning journey. Active listening to children's play and dialogue becomes vital in creating a democratic and supportive learning environment, empowering them as leaders in their learning journey.

As I conclude this research, I am determined to carry forward the intense experience and invaluable insights gained into my future practice as a research assistant or within the teaching field in higher education. This work has equipped me with not only a deep understanding of the REA but also enhanced my critical thinking, analytical skills, and the ability to communicate complex ideas effectively. I am confident that these attributes will not only contribute to the advancement of knowledge in my chosen field but will also positively impact the learning experiences of students in my future practice. I believe that the knowledge acquired during this research journey, with the support from my critical friend, will contribute to fostering a culture of curiosity, innovation, and academic excellence in my future practice.

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