

### Bringing the Reggio Emilia Approach to Rural Communities

Education in the United States is viewed as a top priority to most individuals. Parents typically want their child to receive a good education while being at the forefront of teaching and learning. However, in the United States most schools, including early childhood education schools, have used a traditional approach to learning where the teacher gives the student information, usually verbally or in writing, and expects the student to retain the information for a later time. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, some countries, such as Finland and Italy, decided that the standard method of teaching is not always the most successful. In Italy, the Reggio Emilia approach was born into the city of Reggio Emilia through the diligence of the community, parents and teachers. In the United States few public school districts and private schools have adopted the Reggio Emilia approach founded in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The teaching approach focuses mostly on the student and an open method of learning. However, the approach is mostly used only in urban areas; it is not common for Reggio Emilia schools to be found in rural areas. This paper will address the reasons professionals believe Reggio Emilia is not found in rural schools and why rural schools may actually be the best natural setting to use the approach. Reggio Emilia has the ability to be used in any community setting, and should not be focused on only succeeding in urban areas.

Early childhood education is not mandatory. However, statistics that have recently been calculated show that the benefits of early childhood education extend far beyond the pre-kindergarten years of a student's life. Not all children however are privileged enough to attend early childhood education for several reasons: some parents simply do not send their children to any pre-kindergarten schooling; some parents cannot

afford the pre-kindergarten school and various other explanations. Early childhood education of every kind, including approaches like Reggio Emilia, however, should be afforded to every child. However, this is typically not the case.

There are many early childhood education programs that parents can choose from, most using the traditional teaching method taught to those in the education profession. According to the New York Times, as of 2009 there were only approximately 1,200 Reggio Emilia schools in North America. Most of these schools are within the United States and many of the schools are privately run. However, according to the map provided by the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, most of these schools in the United States are located within large cities, which are of urban makeup. The main cities that provide Reggio Emilia schooling are Chicago, Atlanta, New York City and Los Angeles. All of these cities are large metropolitan communities that have a significant amount of residents. The map provides for few, if not zero, Reggio Emilia schools in rural areas.

Reggio Emilia is a learning approach that focuses largely on project work and the student's abilities to learn from their surroundings and curiosity. The approach was founded in the town of Reggio Emilia, Italy by parents who showed an extreme interest in their children receiving the best education possible. The Reggio Emilia approach differs from the traditional teaching methods of the United States in three main ways: 1) the role of the student, 2) the role of the teacher and 3) the type of knowledge to be learned. The student in the Reggio Emilio approach has the ability to influence the topics learned. The student also has the role of a researcher from the very beginning. Most students do not complete any research until later grades; Reggio Emilia allows the

student to research rather than be told. Teachers of the Reggio Emilia approach are taught to be collaborators, co-learners and researchers. The Reggio Emilia approach asks that teachers work together with their students to provide through projects; Reggio Emilia does not want the teacher to provide information solely verbally or through worksheets, but also through hands-on learning. Teachers of Reggio Emilia are to document the project work in their classroom by writing down processes and student's reactions to projects. Additionally, Reggio Emilia classrooms are classrooms of display; projects and life-like scenarios are often displayed throughout the classroom.

Critics have said that the Reggio Emilia approach is only available to affluent communities. It is believed that money and private funding is a large part of what makes the Reggio Emilia approach possible because of some of the wealthy communities that have embraced the method. Critics also believe that for the Reggio Emilia approach to be successful a community must possess certain qualities, such as small classroom size. These beliefs are not necessarily true, and just recently studies have begun to disprove those beliefs. Later in this paper I will discuss the current program implemented in New York State that has taken rural students and placed them successfully within the Reggio Emilia approach to learning, proving that the Reggio Emilia approach can be successful in many different communities.

In my opinion, there are three main reasons why critics believe that Reggio Emilia will not transition to rural schools: poor funding, lack of adequate teaching, and the community itself. Rural communities are said to be much smaller in size than urban communities. Rural communities typically have lower cost of living and are located substantial distances from large cities. The people in rural communities are commonly

familiar with farming; the job opportunities in rural communities usually pay less than those comparable in urban areas. Rural communities pay less money for property taxes and therefore, many times have a lower dollar amount spent per student than suburban and urban schools. Additionally, states use formulas that allow the state to use money paid by other regions in rural communities for education. Lastly, rural schools naturally typically have less specialized curriculums as they do not have the funding to provide for classes outside of the requirements and few electives (the electives are usually pertaining to the home).

As stated above, many rural communities do not receive large sums of state funding to apply to education. The amount spent per student in a rural school is statistically lower than an urban school. The lack of funding is largely due to low property taxes and the fact that rural communities usually have a lower lifetime earning potential than suburban and sometimes urban communities. Cost of living, earnings and spending are usually much lower in rural areas. Research has proven that a large percentage, almost comparable to that of children in urban school districts, lives in poverty in rural communities. The socioeconomic status of a community directly impacts that communities educational funding; without proper funding, it is nearly impossible for schools to provide an education comparable to a school with large amounts of funding. However, it has not been proven that Reggio Emilia is extremely expensive, nor has it been shown that Reggio Emilia cannot succeed in a community with less money.

Furthermore, educators and researchers believe that teachers that have graduated from high-end universities and/or have a master's degree are more likely to work in school districts that pay higher salaries. Rural districts usually have a hard time

recruiting teachers with superior education, and sometimes cannot fill all open teaching positions creating a 'teacher shortage'. It is believed that top quality teachers will only be attracted to and stay within districts that provide high salaries. Because of this downfall, rural districts many times employ teachers that do not have proper credentials. When teachers have improper education and/or credentials, the school suffers by not being able to provide the curriculum to its potential. Additionally, it is said that over all rural teachers have fewer years of experience in teaching. Many critics believe that more experience creates a better teacher, meaning that again rural schools suffer another shortfall. Overall, critics believe that the quality of teaching and teachers that are in rural schools is lesser than that of urban or suburban districts.

Lastly, the rural community has several characteristics that lead professionals to believe that a special set of problems is affecting rural districts. Many rural school districts are facing declining enrollment, which then decreases state funding. Also, rural communities are typically much more spread out than urban and suburban. Because of the wide spread land transportation to and from school is much longer and further. With funding for transportation being part of the districts funding, this large cost sometimes is too much to burden a district with. If enrollment is declining and transportation makes attending school hard, would changing the curriculum to Reggio Emilia have any positive results?

However, it is my opinion that rural communities are the ideal communities for Reggio Emilia schools to succeed. Some of the characteristics that are found within a rural school district make them the best candidates for Reggio Emilia implementation. There are three specific characteristics of rural schools that match the Reggio Emilia

model: 1) small class size, 2) teachers willing to learn new methods, and 3) rural environments are great for hands on projects and field trips. Professionals believe that these are three of the most important characteristics that allow the Reggio Emilia approach to succeed in early childhood education.

Rural schools statistically have fewer children than suburban and urban schools. According to the *Rural Development Perspectives*, a typical rural school averages about one-half the amount of students enrolled in comparison to urban schools. Because the schools have half the amount of children attending, naturally the class sizes in rural schools are much smaller. This directly fills one of the requirements of the Reggio Emilia approach; one of the primary characteristics of Reggio Emilia is having smaller class size. In a rural school, class sizes would be roughly the same as they currently are. Because the class sizes in rural schools is already low, implementing Reggio Emilia would not require rural districts to hire more teachers; the teachers that already teach within the school would likely be enough. This is much more beneficial than in an urban district that would need to hire approximately two more teachers for each class. The transition to Reggio Emilia curriculum in rural districts would be an easy transition when it would come to ensuring that class size stayed small.

Next, as mentioned above, many teachers within rural districts have degrees from less “selective” universities and much fewer teachers have master’s degrees. However, the Reggio Emilia approach is not normally included in undergraduate education lessons. Most universities teach their undergraduate students the standard method of teaching, in which the teacher is simply presenting information to students and expecting them to absorb the information. Because the Reggio Emilia approach is not taught at

universities, teachers who are hired to teach the curriculum need to be trained in the approach regardless. It may be beneficial for teachers in rural communities to learn the Reggio Emilia approach, as learning the new method may provide them with more training than what was received in their degree program. Thus, the teachers will receive proper training and will all be on the same level; whether one teacher has a master's degree would not likely be an advantage. Additionally, bringing the Reggio Emilia approach to rural school districts would likely attract higher educated individuals.

Reggio Emilia is an approach that takes an intellectual teacher and someone who is willing to teach a method unlike that of traditional school; a teacher who believes this is an ideal teaching method is likely to be an individual with great interest in teaching and the benefits of supplementary methods of teaching. Rural communities would be able to significantly increase the strength of their teachers if they implemented the Reggio Emilia approach.

Lastly, rural schools are usually in remote areas, but are surrounded with plenty of opportunities for field trips and learning. In the Reggio Emilia approach the environment is thought of as the students 'third teacher'. In fact, in Reggio Emilia the environment surrounding the student is as important as the teacher. The Reggio Emilia approach believes that each student has the ability to learn effectively through going out into their environment and questioning the world they are in. Children are naturally curious, and at the early childhood stage, a child has much to learn. The teachers of Reggio Emilia are encouraged to bring their students into their surroundings; a rural school district has many environments that a student may learn from. Most often rural schools are within distance of farming and animal life. Early childhood education is a time when children

are able to grasp the information of animals if they have not already done so. The Reggio Emilia approach would transition to rural environments with no loss of outside environment teachings. This is again, another example of why the Reggio Emilia approach would thrive in rural communities and why the transition to Reggio Emilia would be fairly easy for rural school districts.

Each year, especially in urban areas such as Chicago, public schools systems strive to solve numerous problems that affect urban districts. Why do we never hear about rural districts and the states effort to aid and enhance the curriculum in rural areas? Rural communities are not given the same attention, nor does the state usually receive the same pressures from rural districts as urban districts for reform. Additionally, most issues that are dealt with on a yearly basis have little or nothing to do with teaching styles; most states deal with issues pertaining to financial and affirmative action related problems. I believe that if states were to look at the way early childhood education is being taught, and realize the benefits compared to the lifetime cost of an individual for the state, states may decide to reform early childhood education teaching styles - and Reggio Emilia would be high on the list of methods to conform to.

If rural schools were given the attention that urban schools are given each year, it is likely that rural school districts would be able to reform in a positive way (if that district needs reform, of course). So much attention is focused on updating and funding urban schools that most rural schools do not have a large change in their year-to-year funding. The Reggio Emilia approach would be most practical to implement in rural school districts because few changes would need to take place, which would expectedly cost the district less money. Rural school districts already encompass many of the



characteristics of the Reggio Emilia approach, like small class size. The small changes that would need to be made to rural schools for the transition to Reggio Emilia would be low cost and cost effective for the students.

Furthermore, State University of New York Geneseo implemented a summer program entitled “Soaring Stars” for the 2012 summer in rural schools districts of Livingston County. The program uses the Reggio Emilia approach and is the first of its kind in rural New York. The program selected twenty-seven students from nine separate districts to participate in the program. The students were to attend the summer program five days a week for six hours each day; the program ran for six consecutive weeks. The summer program was successful and all but six children returned during the 2013 summer. The program has also grown and added another class of children. The professionals that are part of the SUNY Reggio Emilia approach say they have already seen large progression in the students, and will follow the children’s progress through high school. Soaring Stars was funded through a \$40,000.00 grant. This program is direct proof that the Reggio Emilia approach can be taught in rural school districts, be successful, and also cost effective.

SUNY Geneseo’s example is one that can prove to states that early childhood education has benefits that are far beyond the years children spend in pre-kindergarten learning.

As professionals have said, the above three characteristics of a rural classroom are common throughout rural school districts. If this is the case, then why has the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance reported that most Reggio Emilia schools are in urban areas? Urban school districts would likely have to make more changes than rural districts

to successfully teach the curriculum using the Reggio Emilia approach. This may be because urban communities, along with suburban communities, tend to be more interested in newer approaches. Additionally, the town of Reggio Emilia, Italy, where the Reggio Emilia approach was founded, is like that of an urban community in the United States. Professionals often believe that it would be best to try to the approach in a similar environment, but with all of the success that has statistically been found teaching children in early childhood education with the Reggio Emilia approach I believe it would be beneficial to bring the approach outside of the urban districts. Bring the Reggio Emilia approach to rural districts - allow children in rural communities the same opportunities afforded in urban and suburban communities.

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