

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preschool Teachers' Educational Perspectives in the Implementation of the Reggio Emilia Approach: Take a kindergarten in Singapore as an example

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ABSTRACT

With advancements in technology and societal development, early childhood education curricula are continuously evolving to meet societal demands. Globally, an increasing number of preschools are adopting the Reggio Emilia approach and a “child-centered” educational philosophy. This study aims to explore the practical application of the Reggio Emilia approach in a preschool in Singapore. A qualitative research design was utilized, and data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with three participants. Snowball sampling was employed to recruit preschool teachers for the study. The findings indicate that teachers are inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy and attempt to incorporate it into their teaching practices in various ways. However, limitations such as resource constraints and a lack of parental understanding hinder full implementation of the approach. Thus, establishing a strong support system that addresses teachers' actual needs is essential for the successful implementation of the Reggio Emilia curriculum.

Keywords: implementation, Reggio Emilia Approach, preschool teachers, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is a crucial period for child development, providing children with a stimulating and suitable environment that promotes comprehensive growth across physical, cognitive, and social-emotional domains (Balat, Beceren, and Özdemir 2011; Li Yanling 2018). The habits, skills, and knowledge cultivated during this period have a profound impact on children's future development (Goffin 2013). High-quality early childhood education offers numerous benefits (Morgan 2019), and at its core is the curriculum, which aims to provide children with enriched developmental experiences, fostering growth across multiple domains and laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning and success (Melhuish et al. 2015).

Singapore's early childhood education policy reforms reflect the government's strong commitment to educational quality. Since gaining independence in 1965, reforms in Singapore's educational system have aimed to enhance the

nation's competitiveness and relevance within the global economy (Deng & Gopinathan 2016; Gopinathan 2007). Under the guidance of the Ministry of Education since 2000, Singapore's early childhood policies have gradually shifted from an academic focus to holistic development (Karupiah 2014), aiming to reduce an overemphasis on literacy skills while encouraging child-centered, play-based curricula that promote social-emotional development and positive attitudes toward learning (MOE 2012; Wong 2000).

In this context, the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) has gradually been introduced in Singapore. Originating in Italy (INCIRCI 2022), REA advocates a child-centered approach that emphasizes collaborative involvement from teachers, families, and the community to provide opportunities for autonomy, inquiry, and problem-solving skills (Cagliari et al. 2016, 2016; INCIRCI 2022). This approach is rooted in eight core principles, Italian culture, and constructivist theory (Albqaen 2024; Alsedrani 2020). Unlike other

curricula, REA emphasizes emergent curriculum based on children's active exploration rather than pre-designed content (Albqaen 2024; Yang 2021).

While the Reggio Emilia approach has demonstrated significant success in Western countries, its implementation in East Asia and Southeast Asia faces challenges, primarily due to differences in cultural and educational ideologies (Hsieh 2004; Lee 2010; Lee and Tseng 2008; Rajput 2017). This study aims to examine the current state of Reggio Emilia approach implementation in Singaporean preschools, focusing on preschool teachers' perspectives on the needs and challenges they encounter in their teaching practice. Through this study, we hope to fill existing knowledge gaps regarding the application of the Reggio Emilia curriculum within Southeast Asian socio-cultural contexts, providing insights for future curriculum implementation and policy adjustments.

Research Objectives

This study aims to conduct a case analysis of early childhood institutions in Singapore that implement the REA, exploring the practical outcomes of REA locally and identifying key factors influencing these outcomes. Specifically, the study will focus on preschool teachers' experiences in curriculum implementation, including critical factors such as teacher training, parental involvement, and curriculum resources, to reveal the applicability and potential challenges of the REA curriculum in Singapore.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design. "Qualitative research underscores the importance of observing variables in a natural environment" (Baldacchino 2011). Data for this study were collected through interviews, which aim to elicit people's knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, all of which are closely linked to understanding specific social realities (Hussein 2022). In this study, the focus is on describing whether preschool teachers in Singapore are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, their perspectives on applying its principles in practical

teaching, the challenges they encounter, and the resulting needs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to uncover preschool teachers' practical experiences related to the Reggio Emilia approach. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. How is the Reggio Emilia approach implemented in Singapore?
2. What factors influence the effectiveness of REA implementation in Singapore?
3. What specific needs and challenges do preschool teachers encounter in their practical application of the REA?

Participants

Table 1. Demographic information

No	Gender	Total years of working experience	Years of practicing the REA
1	Female	8	2
2	Female	6	1.5
3	Female	10 above	4

The three participants in this study were identified through snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, the first stage involves identifying senior individuals related to the research participants, and the second stage involves contacting other participants through these individuals (Berg and Lune 2019). All three participants were female. Their educational levels are as follows: one has a diploma, and two hold bachelor's degrees.

Data Collection Strategy

This study utilizes semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool. The interview questions focus on teachers' attitudes, experiences, and needs in the implementation of the Reggio Emilia approach, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers translate the Reggio curriculum into specific teaching practices and the challenges they face. The interview outline was designed based on a review of existing literature, particularly analyses of teachers' implementation experiences with similar educational approaches (Cagliari et al. 2016; Gantt 2021).

All participants will be asked the same core questions to ensure consistency and comparability of the data. The interview duration will range from 20 to 40 minutes, and all interviews will be recorded. To ensure data reliability, the researcher will use a standardized interview guide, and all interviews will be conducted by the same researcher.

This study will strictly adhere to academic ethical guidelines, ensuring the respect and protection of participants' rights. Before the interviews, participants will be informed about the purpose, process, and data collection methods of the study, ensuring voluntary participation and signing of informed consent forms. All interview data will be used solely by the researcher, and participants' identities will be kept confidential with data anonymized.

Data analysis

This study employs thematic analysis to analyze the interview data from the three participants. First, all interview recordings will be transcribed into text and coded using NVivo 14 software. The units of analysis will be sentences or paragraphs. Based on the research objectives, the coding process will be divided into two stages: open coding and axial coding. Open coding aims to identify initial themes from the data, while axial coding involves categorizing and refining these themes.

RESULTS

This study aims to explore the implementation of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) in Singapore's early childhood education. Through semi-structured interviews with three preschool teachers, the research identifies key themes regarding their understanding, practices, challenges, and needs related to REA.

Table 2. Analyze the Key Themes

Key Themes	References
Implementation of REA	13
Challenges in Practice	17

Teacher training and 8 learning

1. Understanding of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA)

Participants demonstrated a deep understanding of REA's core principles, including specific practices such as:

Discussions with children to understand their thoughts and interests (Participant 2).

Implementing REA by arranging the classroom environment to facilitate learning (Participant 1).

Providing opportunities for children to choose topic (Participant 2).

"We must respect the child" (Participant 3).

Encouraging children to follow their interests and engage in real exploration by touching (Participant 1).

In practice, participants exhibited strong alignment with REA's child-centered approach, emphasizing the importance of observing and responding to children's interests and needs. They also highlighted the role of the environment as an essential element of REA, acknowledging its influence as the "third teacher" and the need to create a stimulating and inspiring learning environment to foster exploration and creativity.

2. Challenges in Implementing the Reggio Emilia Approach

While participants expressed enthusiasm for REA, they also identified several challenges:

REA requires teachers to dedicate significant time to preparation and documentation (Participant 3).

Sacrifice personal time, including holidays and evenings (Participant 3).

Parents concerns that their children are not practicing skills like writing, Mandarin pinyin, and English pronunciation, nor receiving a structured academic education (Participant 1).

Parents may transfer their children (Participant 3).

Some parents worry that children are only playing rather than learning (Participant 1).

REA resources within EADA's training courses are limited (Participant 2).

Time constraints are a major challenge for teachers, who often struggle to fully implement REA due to scheduling pressures. Additionally, parental expectations present another barrier; some parents have limited understanding of REA principles and prioritize academic achievements, which can create pressure for preschool teacher. Opportunities for professional development in REA are also relatively limited.

3. Professional Development and Support for Teachers

Participants pointed out multiple pathways of learning about REA:

Finding support groups on platforms like Facebook (Participant 1).

Opportunities for professional development in Italy (Participant 3).

Receiving training from their principal (Participants 1, 2, and 3).

Engaging with trainers from Italy (Participants 1, 2, and 3).

Learning about REA through books (Participant 2).

Professional development and support can be broadly categorized into two approaches: self-directed learning and formal training. Self-directed learning involves accessing information through books, articles, and online resources. Formal professional development refers to teachers participating in workshops and training sessions provided by the kindergarten, offering them opportunities to share experiences, reflect on practices, and learn from one another.

DISCUSSION

This study provides important insights into the implementation of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) in Singapore's early childhood education. Participants demonstrated a deep understanding of REA's core principles, including child-centeredness, documentation of learning, and the role of the environment as the "third teacher." However, teachers face challenges in applying REA, including time constraints, parental expectations, and resource limitations, which align with difficulties noted in previous research on implementing innovative pedagogies within

traditional education systems (Benveniste and McEwan 2000; Davis 2003; Diddi and Nirappel 2023). Participants mainly rely on self-directed learning and occasional training to address these challenges, highlighting the need for more systematic and ongoing professional development support, a finding consistent with related studies (Arseven 2014; Edwards and Gandini 2018). Based on these insights, this study recommends enhancing teacher training, fostering a supportive school culture, increasing parental involvement, and advocating for policy reforms to promote the successful implementation of REA in Singapore. By revealing the benefits and challenges of applying REA in Singapore, this research provides a valuable reference for adapting this approach across different cultural contexts, and future studies could further explore its long-term impact on children's learning and development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the practical application of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) in Singapore's early childhood education, revealing teachers' understanding of REA and the challenges they face in its implementation. The study found that although teachers strongly identify with the principles of REA, they encounter multiple obstacles in practice, including time constraints, limited resources, parental expectations, and insufficient professional development support, due to differences in the social context. Based on these findings, the study recommends improving in-service training systems and enhancing parental understanding and support to better integrate REA into Singapore's society. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the application of REA in different cultural contexts. Future research could further explore the impact of REA on children's long-term development and learning in a broader range of educational environments, offering theoretical foundations and practical support for innovation in early childhood education.

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