
A Comparison of Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia in the Early Childhood Years

— Renee Schwartz

As a progressive educator with training in three European methodologies — Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia — I'm often asked to summarize them and share their similarities and differences. Here some notes from my perspective.

All three of these methods have an emphasis on beauty and order in the classroom space. Socialization between children is encouraged. Teachers are supported in their professional development and expected to be highly reflective practitioners. Student progress is measured by checklists, portfolios, or narratives instead of grades. The curriculum is largely student-led.

In Waldorf education, the early childhood years are completely play-based. Traditional academic subjects are not offered as part of the curriculum, although they are supported by many activities done with students. For example, although mathematics is not formally taught as an abstract subject, children learn to count through games, finger plays, and cooking activities. In fact, many schools bake bread or make vegetable soup each and every week. Student interest in formal topics like reading instruction is responded to quietly, spelling or writing a few words that the child asks for. It is considered healthiest for the child's overall development to wait until signs of grade school readiness emerge before academics are intentionally introduced. A Waldorf early childhood program emphasizes plenty of outdoor and indoor creative play; open-ended toys such as play silks and wooden blocks; and storytelling. Children also have artistic experiences including coloring and drawing, watercolor painting, beeswax modeling, and seasonal crafts.

Waldorf classroom items are child-sized, made with natural materials such as wool and wood, and are usually handmade. The walls are painted

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beautiful, warm colors and subtle, aesthetic touches greet the eye. The cycle of the seasons drives many of the stories and activities, including rhythmic celebration of festivals year after year. The children are thus guided in staying connected to the natural world around them. Circle Time is a daily gathering for the whole group and includes songs, movement verses, and story. The teacher carefully prepares for this by memorizing each part of the Circle. The Circle is done for several weeks, giving children time to internalize each component. Beyond that, much of the day is for play.

An essential tenet of Waldorf early childhood education is the understanding that the young child learns through imitation. The teacher is a purposefully engaged adult who cares for the environment by moving quietly and calmly in the space, often doing household tasks in the classroom such as sewing or baking and more vigorous things like woodwork, gardening, and fiber crafts, for example. In their play, the children imitate what they see and hear to “digest” these experiences and feel within their bodies how to move, to work, and to interact with others in social life. Imitation is the children's means for exploring and coming to understand the world. Stories picture the events and processes of daily life. Explicit explanation and instruction will have their time in the future. The early childhood teacher is committed to protecting and holding a space for children to simply enjoy being little and to find their way into the world in an unhurried way.

A Montessori classroom is likewise filled with low open shelving and wooden items. Children are given child-size authentic tools (such as small vegetable brushes for washing vegetables or small lawn rakes) and do real work (such as watering the classroom plants or caring for the class pet). Practical

Life, including the social Graces & Courtesies, is an important part of the Montessori curriculum. Children learn table washing, silver polishing, and how to do various kinds of fasteners on their clothing. There are also Sensorial materials which help hone each of the senses—touch, smell, taste, temperature, vision, etc.

A Montessori environment seeks to give the child as much independence as possible, as this is considered respectful to the child. Montessori classrooms are based on a foundation of three things: a prepared teacher, a prepared environment, and freedom with responsibility. The classroom is itself considered to be one of the teachers, and activities are set up which children can do independently once they receive a lesson. Children are expected to plan their own day: choosing activities which interest them, getting them out carefully, completing them correctly and without disturbing others, and putting them back properly on the shelf. Teachers move about the classroom, giving frequent one-on-one or small group lessons to students as they are ready for new concepts or new materials. The teacher documents what each child is working on. Work is placed on a tray or on a woven cloth mat so that each child's workspace is delineated from another's. Children may work alone or with friends. They practice self-regulation by balancing the variety of activities they do in a day, not disturbing the work placed on someone else's tray or mat, and getting the materials out and putting them back correctly. There is no emphasis in Montessori on free imaginative play. The Art experiences given to children are often Artist Studies where students learn to identify the work of different great artists based on their style.

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which the children are given lessons on and expected to put into their daily plan. The lessons have a set progression. For example, the Sandpaper Letters would come before the Movable Alphabet. One popular literacy activity is the Farm. A farm scene with a beautiful farmhouse and animals is in one corner of the classroom and this would, at first glance, look quite similar to a Waldorf play material. In Montessori, however, the children use a Movable Alphabet (each letter of the alphabet carved of wood or written on an individual slip of paper) to spell the name of each item on the farm. The child would place an item, such as a sheep, on the mat and lay down the wooden letters or slips of paper to attempt to spell the word. The advantage of the Movable Alphabet is that a child can easily change his or

her mind and replace some of the letters with others while spelling. The children would then check his or her work to determine if it is correct.

In Montessori classrooms, each classroom material or lesson is referred to as a “work.” Dr. Montessori observed that, when given the choice between free play and working side-by-side with adults engaging in or mimicking their purposeful work, students chose the latter. Therefore, she set up her school environments to meet this desire for work that was authentic and true. Similar to Waldorf, Montessori programs for adolescents often try to take place on a working farm. Dr. Montessori also believed that children should be given scientifically accurate facts (explained in a way suitable to their age) and the correct nomenclature for all terminology from the very beginning. The first lesson for the first day of Grade One is the Big Bang.

Math materials include large wooden cabinets of Colored Bead Chains used for skip counting, as well as Golden Bead Material for making numbers and doing computation (unit beads, ten bars made of ten

unit beads wired together, hundred squares, and thousand cubes). These materials are very concrete, since a thousand cube is literally the size of a thousand of the golden beads. Dr. Montessori believed that if a material was broken or missing some of its pieces it should be removed from the classroom until it was repaired or replaced. She felt the children should be surrounded by purposeful order at all times.

Geography lessons include making landforms and water features using trays with pre-made high and low places to which colored water is added. A favorite is the Colored Globe of the Continents, which shows each continent mass simply as a color; prior to this comes the Sandpaper Globe which shows the difference between land masses and water by having the landmasses made of sandpaper. In this way the child moves from a more concrete tactile experience of the globe to a more abstract visual experience.

Dr. Montessori, the first woman doctor in Italy, was a well-regarded Italian pediatrician who was asked to create curriculum materials based on her expertise in child development. Every series of materials which she designed moves carefully and sequentially from more concrete to more abstract. Montessori classrooms are mixed-age within a three-year span, corresponding to what Dr. Montessori termed the “planes of development” of 3-6, 6-9, and 9-12. Teachers give students the next lesson along the progression towards abstraction within their own schedule.

Although Montessori and Waldorf early childhood classrooms are both open and tidy, allow students to move around and socialize freely, utilize natural materials and child-size tools, the closed-ended nature of the Montessori materials, the emphasis on academic work, and the responsibility of each child to plan his or her day are the key philosophical differences.

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Reggio Emilia falls somewhere between Waldorf and Montessori on many of these points. This is a good fit for families who want an artistic, child-led model that also incorporates the possibility of direct academic content.

Reggio is famous for the “hundred languages of children,” where every possible mode of artistic and creative expression is considered equal to the other and encouraged. Respect for the child, curiosity and wonder, and joyful learning are key. Like Montessori, however, this freedom of choice does not result in a disorganized free-for-all. The curriculum is completely child-led and designed to unfold over time at a thoughtful pace. The center of a Reggio school is the *atelier*, which is like an enormous, beautifully organized shared art room for all of the classrooms, which encircle it like

the spokes of a wheel. In the *atelier* is the *atelierista* who is a trained artist. Each classroom has two teachers, one with a background as an educator and a second with a background as a professional artist.

Multiple classroom teachers are absolutely essential in Reggio because of the high importance placed on documentation. This documentation takes place in many ways and is used to encourage reflection on the part of the teachers as well as the students. Children are often photographed while doing their work, such as painting. The photograph of the work process and the painting itself would then be paired together. The child would, on a later day, be shown the painting and asked an open-ended question like, “What do you remember about this?” Whatever the child says would then be written down. Beautiful wall displays are created along the hallways in a Reggio school, with student artwork alongside the photos of the artistic process and their own words. The art displays would be based around a theme that the children are studying, such as shadows or self-portraits.

The theme in question is studied for many weeks and in many ways; it is usually chosen by observing the students at play and seeing what their interests are. An example may be puddles on the playground. Puddles are explored and observed in many ways with the teacher documenting and reflecting the growing ideas of the children. This documentation is key to Reggio curriculum development. At night the teacher is expected to read over these notes and base the next day's activities on them. It is easy in the hustle and bustle of the classroom to miss the tiny details of a child's thoughtful words. When this is written down and then read later, the teacher has time to decide what tomorrow's activity should be to best develop the curiosity and interest further.

The new activity of the day is often called a "provocation" since it is designed to provoke further discussion and engagement with the ideas of the children. The currently popular idea of "loose parts" play is inspired by Reggio. A provocation may simply be a pile of pieces of PVC pipe, or some other open-ended material. As the children engage in the new provocation, the documentation cycle begins anew. In this way, the curriculum is child-led and ever evolving. The teacher follows the children but is also a leader and a guide, helping them to explore their ideas.

There is heavy emphasis upon allowing students to express their ideas in as many ways as possible. Using different art materials allows a child to explore an idea in a new way. Self-portraits may be drawn, sculptured in clay from the drawing, then as a paper collage based on the sculpture, etc. Unlike both Waldorf and Montessori, Reggio is a model which was developed strictly for early childhood. There are no requirements for how academic content should be presented in a prescribed sequence according to the plan for the Grades. Children use writing, counting, graphing, and so on as some of their hundred languages. Of the three pedagogies discussed here, Reggio is the most open to technology in the classroom. Audio and video recordings, student use of iPads, and so on would all be included in the hundred languages and are very much seen as useful for documentation.

A Reggio classroom is full of students busily learning and exploring while the teachers observe and reflect. No pre-determined lessons are part of the curriculum and no topic is off-limits. Art is key and at the forefront of creating understanding. Compared to Montessori, with its carefully constructed group of materials and strict lessons on how one works with each material, it is much more open-ended. Compared to Waldorf, with its emphasis on free imaginative play in the early childhood years, it is much more academic. Students in a Reggio classroom are encouraged to follow their interests and are carefully guided to go slowly as they form their ideas in depth. Academics such as reading and mathematics are not off the table; they are considered one of the many ways of interacting with new ideas. In this way, it seems that Reggio Emilia stands between the polarities of Montessori and Waldorf education.

All of these methods share in common their deep respect for the child. The view of how to support and enrich a developing child is different; the end goal of a balanced human being is the same. Waldorf early childhood teachers are often asked to explain the differences between Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia since parents sometimes cannot see the differences at first glance. They are all European methods with classrooms bursting with color and beautiful things begging to be touched, loving adults who are carefully guiding the children's development in a thoughtful way, and happy children moving around, talking together, and eagerly entering into their chosen activities of the day. I hope that this article has helped shed some light on the underlying philosophical differences which underpin each, as I have observed them in my many years of teaching. ♦

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