

Kindergarten, Italian style: A growing movement eschews top-down learning and lets children set their own education goals [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Before the youngsters even set foot in their kindergarten class this past fall, teacher Lana Kostiuk had transformed the space to reflect her innovative approach to teaching and learning.

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Books, puzzles and building blocks stayed, but she added a science inquiry centre and an arts studio with assorted paints and materials displayed in jars and baskets.

Instead of a little plastic chair, a tree stump rests next to her wicker chair in the learning corner. Plants are peppered throughout the room. The standard sand table is now a more complex sensory stand with wild rice, brown rice and lavender.

Gone are the cartoon figures and other commercial images that can overwhelm the senses and trivialize childhood in some kindergarten classes.

Ms. Kostiuk's attention to the design elements in her first kindergarten class -- a challenge she's taking up after 15 years of teaching other early elementary years -- doesn't reflect any special attachment to the Home and Garden Television network.

Rather, it's all about a Reggio-inspired kindergarten program, an educational movement that is starting to transform elementary classrooms across Canada.

Reggio schools date back to 1945, when a group of parents in the northern Italian town Reggio Emilia, devastated by war and dictatorship, vowed to dismantle the rigid, church-monopolized pre-school system.

Founder Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) identified the problem with traditional schooling as "sticking to its stupid and intolerable indifference toward children, its opportunistic and obsequious attention toward authority, and its self-serving cleverness, pushing pre-packaged knowledge."

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Reggio's child-centred philosophy is making its way into elementary schools in Canada after sweeping select child-care centres and early childhood education college programs in communities across the country in the past decade.

And this grassroots momentum will get a big boost after a group of Canadian educators participate in a study tour of Reggio schools in February. It is just the third Canadian delegation to make the trip.

But even as the school system in Reggio is about to celebrate its 40th anniversary, its evolving approach remains revolutionary today, especially in North America, where there's a cultural push for accelerated, focused learning strategies for ever-younger children.

"For those of us who have been in early childhood education for a long time, we've become rather distressed about what's happening to kids and all the pressures. I think teachers now are finding ways that are helping them step back," said Patricia Tarr, head of the Canadian delegation and professor of education at the University of Calgary.

So, just as some parents and educators push pre-schoolers and kindergarten pupils to tackle reading and writing and focus on results, the Reggio-inspired approach zeroes in on purposeful play and process.

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Ms. Kostiuk will go to Italy as part of the study tour; Reggio schools in Italy can't be replicated or exported, but educators can soak up the philosophy and create Reggio-inspired classrooms in their communities.

Already, informal Reggio groups are growing across the country.

Grade 1 teachers from York House in Vancouver last year visited Bishop Strachan School, a Toronto private school at the forefront of the Reggio movement in Canada; four years ago, its junior school developed its own Reggio approach.

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Meanwhile, Calgary has become a hub of Reggio-inspired activity ever since the University of Calgary hosted the world-renown Reggio exhibit, The Hundred Languages of Children, last year. The local Reggio network has grown from about 20 to 225 members in the last 18 months.

Advocates in Toronto are already seeing a similar response from the Reggio exhibit, which runs until the end of February. It's being presented by the Toronto District School Board, York University, Seneca College and Bishop Strachan School.

Carol Anne Wien, education professor at York University, a leading Reggio advocate in Canada and one of the exhibit organizers, said the institutional interest of Canada's largest school board provides a real opportunity for the Reggio-inspired approach to take off beyond pockets of teachers networking at the grassroots levels. In its first six weeks, more than 3,000 educators from Montreal to Windsor toured the exhibit.

"It's phenomenal. It opens up people's sense of what's possible," said Ms. Wien.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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