

PARENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND PERCEPTIONS OF
THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH
IN A SMALL NEW ZEALAND CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

A significant area of education research has been dedicated towards increasing parental involvement in schools. Parental and family involvement is considered crucial in the education of children and is associated with stronger educational outcomes. In New Zealand it is expected that schools work closely with members of their school community to design their own school curriculum responsive to their local needs. Supporting and encouraging strong home school partnerships is a feature of this. In this broader context this research examined parental perceptions and understandings of a small Catholic primary school's unique approach to curriculum, based on the principles of Reggio Emilia. Central to implementation of the Reggio Emilia Approach is parental involvement and partnership. A group of six parents from the school participated in a focus group interview to share their perceptions and understandings about Reggio Emilia. Included in their discussion are their views on Reggio Emilia in relation to parent participation, community involvement, documentation of learning, flexible curriculum, aesthetics, child initiated learning and child confidence and independence. This paper intends to inform the reader of the parents' perceptions and understandings of Reggio Emilia and its implementation in this New Zealand primary school setting.

Introduction

The past two decades has seen a considerable amount of research, change and policy making in the area of New Zealand education. This has been a trend in New Zealand and internationally. A significant area of research has been dedicated to increasing parental involvement in schools (Domina, 2005; Ramsey, Hawk, Harold, Marriot & Poskitt, 1993). Parental and family involvement is considered crucial in the education of children and is associated with stronger educational outcomes (Epstein, 1986, as cited in Domina, 2005). Valuing such parental involvement is a feature of the educational approach in the Italian municipality of Reggio Emilia. This approach to curriculum informs practice in my school. I am interested in what parents understand of it. This research project therefore investigates parents' perceptions of the unique curriculum approach, Reggio Emilia, offered in a small New Zealand Catholic Primary school.

The investigation of parental understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia approach in St. Lucy's Catholic School (this is a pseudonym for the school) is particularly interesting to myself as the school's principal. As an educator I have an avid interest in family involvement in children's education and the quality of educational outcomes for children. I was appointed to St. Lucy's Catholic School as principal in 2004. When appointed I had no prior knowledge of the Reggio Emilia approach. The school's Board of Trustees had introduced Reggio Emilia as a curriculum approach a year previously. I immediately sought to learn as much as possible about this approach, as in my position as principal, it was vital that I understood its pedagogical grounding and could articulate this within the school community. I began reading journal articles and books about Reggio Emilia, participated in Reggio Emilia workshops and attended

relevant conferences. It was through my own learning and involvement in the Reggio Emilia approach that I began to appreciate its perspective on the importance of parental partnership and involvement in the development of quality educational outcomes. I wondered if and how the parents at my school understood this aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach. Did they have an investment in the school in the way the Reggio Emilia pedagogisti suggest is necessary? It was through this personal professional learning as principal, the research question, “What are the parental understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach in a small New Zealand Catholic School?” emerged.

The policy context for curriculum in New Zealand primary schools

A major review of the administrative organisation of the New Zealand state education system and school curriculum was undertaken in 1987. It involved wide spread community consultation. These findings were published in the 1988 government report *Tomorrow's Schools: the reform of educational administration in New Zealand*, known as *The Picot Report* (cited in Ramsey, Hawk, Harold, Marriott & Poskitt, 1993). A significant finding in the report was the strong response from parents and the community to share in decision making with schools. The review led to a change from a highly centralised and extra-locally controlled educational system in New Zealand, to a system of self-management for schools, aiming to be more accountable and responsive to stakeholders (Timperley & Robinson, 1998). The reforms are commonly known as the ‘*Tomorrow's Schools*’ reforms. Boards of Trustees [BOT] were formed with the principal positioned as the chief executive (Collins, 1997). A high level of accountability to the local community and the need to collaborate directly with parents over the administration and operation of the school was now expected. Parental involvement in school governance was also an expectation of these reforms. Soon after ‘*Tomorrow's*

schools' (Lange, 1988) a new national curriculum framework along with curriculum documents in seven learning areas to was introduced to provide a “broad and balanced education” relevant to societal change (Ministry of Education, 1993, p.8). Parental involvement in curriculum development was not an explicit feature of the curriculum framework but the context of children’s lives beyond the classroom was relevant to what actually happened at school.

The national curriculum was reviewed in 2002 and a new draft curriculum designed to replace this was tabled for consultation in 2006 (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2006). The new curriculum due to be introduced during late 2007, expects schools to work closely with members of their school community to design their own school curriculum responsive to their local needs. This is a change to the previous curriculum and expectations of parental involvement, which were, centred more at the level of governance. The draft curriculum states that “careful planning results in a school curriculum that is connected, coherent, and balanced and reflects the particular needs and interests of the school’s students and community” (Ministry Of Education, 2006, p. 26). The Ministry of Education [MOE] provides guidelines on curriculum design indicating that the sharing of values and beliefs within a particular school community “utilises local opportunities, resources and the community support” (Ministry Of Education, 2006, p. 26) supporting and encouraging strong home school partnerships in the process. This move towards more parental involvement in a school is particularly pleasing because the new curriculum draft sits in accord with the principles of the unique approach to curriculum at St. Lucy’s Catholic School. As such, the broader policy environment provides some impetus for this research’s direction.

The approach to curriculum taken at St. Lucy's Catholic School.

The Sisters of Mercy established St. Lucy's Catholic School. Its primary purpose is to provide an education that upholds the teachings of the Catholic Church. The school is part of a Christ centred community of faith, founded and guided by the enduring values of the Mercy Tradition. Accordingly the school strives to educate the whole child, promoting total development of mind, body and spirit, upholding both excellence and integrity in all students and all school endeavours. The Board of Trustees and staff through their plans, policies and actions endeavour to reflect the values and Special Catholic Character of the school so it continues to be the foundation stone of our strategic direction and permeates all aspects of curriculum delivery.

In 2003 the school's BOT moved to implement a unique approach to curriculum called Reggio Emilia. This approach is modelled on an early childhood education system established in the Italian municipality of Reggio Emilia post world-war-two. Schools like St. Lucy's Catholic School strive to cultivate and guide each child's learning through their intellectual, emotional, social and moral potentials (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1988). We work to implement a theory of teaching that subscribes to social constructivism (Edwards et al, 1988). Social constructivism focuses on the relationships between families, peers, and schools that orientate children towards interpreting and making sense of their world (McInerney & McInerney, 1998). Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of Reggio schools had a vision for education where he sought to activate and support children's learning through their reciprocal relationships with other children, family, teachers, society and the environment. This is how we would characterise our approach to teaching and learning at St. Lucy's Catholic School.

There are only a small number of primary schools in New Zealand that have adopted this particular approach. In Auckland there are four 'Reggio Primary Schools'. The Reggio Emilia approach is more commonly found in the early childhood setting. This is similar in Australia (Ardzejewska & Coutts, 2004). There is very little information as to why some primary schools have become interested in Reggio Emilia and what influenced their decision to introduce it. In fact there is a paucity of research on the Reggio Emilia approach in the primary school setting (Ardzejewska & Coutts, 2004). Fullan (as cited in Ardzejewska and Coutts, 2004) suggests that if the initiation and implementation of Reggio Emilia in the primary school setting is to be successful, we need to investigate the ways this approach has been introduced. I argue that the relevance of the Reggio Emilia approach in the primary setting and its relevance outside of Italy, needs to be investigated as well. It is just not enough to understand how Reggio Emilia can be successful; we need to establish that it is correct for local contexts too. Do Reggio Emilia ideas have relevance to education in the New Zealand? One of the aims of this project was to find out how parents at St. Lucy's Catholic School interpreted the approach to curriculum and viewed its relationships to their children's ongoing education.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

In the immediate post World War II period, Loris Malaguzzi and the other educators in Reggio Emilia consulted the local community to gauge the community's vision for education. Malaguzzi was the educational theorist and leader of the Reggio Emilia Approach for over forty years. Malaguzzi actively sought information from existing pedagogical philosophies and structures during the development of the approach. The theories of influence included those of Dewey, Vygotsky and Piaget (Dennis & Marchenko, 2005; Fraser, 2000; Thornton & Brunton, 2005). They were particularly

interested in Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism to understand how children co-constructed knowledge in social situations. Vygotsky held that learning was a collaborative process (Fraser, 2000; Rinaldi, 2006) an idea that differed from the dominant Piagetian ideas (Malaguzzi, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006) about learning at the time. Whereas Piaget thought the aim of teaching was to provide the conditions for learning (Malaguzzi, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006), Vygotsky showed us the importance of the social aspects of learning. This idea helped educators in Reggio Emilia form a view of the child as one who is a social, intelligent, strong, creative and competent learner (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1988). Reggio Emilia educators were also influenced by John Dewey, who argued for a child centred curriculum, where children were educated to live in the modern world, constructing knowledge through activity (Fraser, 2000; Rinaldi, 2006). Dewey considered children should learn through and in relation to living (Fraser, 2000; Rinaldi, 2006) and this idea was incorporated into the Reggio Emilia approach.

Embedded in the Reggio Emilia approach is an image of children, families and teachers working together to make schools dynamic and democratic learning environments. Central to the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia are long-term curriculum projects that promote inquiry learning among teachers and children. Parents are expected to collaborate in the learning process. They may be directly involved, for example by coming together with teachers to share thoughts and ideas or being a supportive part of a project as it develops. Or, parents may be less directly involved, by viewing and discussing documentation. In any case their participation is seen as a key. The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based upon reciprocal relationships that value others' opinions, viewpoints and interpretations and emphasise the importance of adults and children learning together (Thornton and Brunton, 2005). Malaguzzi valued parent participation believing it enabled a

communication network leading to fuller and more reciprocal knowledge as well as a more effective search for the best educational methods, content and values. Thus, parent participation at the curricular level is expected and supported in Reggio Emilia Schools.

Malaguzzi considered relationships to be the fundamental strategy for organization within the Reggio Emilia approach. Although children are central to the education system, the relationship with teachers and parents are vitally important.

“The proposition is to consider a triad at the centre of education – children, teachers, and families – a dyad of only teacher and children is to create an artificial world that is not a reality” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p9).

Parents are respected and valued as partners in the education process. They are expected to be active participants and the teachers respect their views and opinions. The sharing of ideas and skills is continuous, occurring through processes of collaboration and communication (Dennis & Marchenko, 2005; Thornton & Brunton, 2005). The close relationship between home and school has positive outcomes for all stakeholders. A strong sense of a community evolves in such schools. Dennis and Marchenko (2005) are convinced that the whole community involvement in the Reggio Emilia approach provides a model for all teachers in their building of effective relationships with parents. Teachers view the participation of families as an intrinsic element in the partnership of bringing together their collective wisdom about the child leading to a deeper understanding of a child’s thoughts, feelings and dispositions (Ceppi & Zini, 1998; Edmiastion & Fitzgerald, 2000; Forman & Fyfe, 1998).

What do we know about the value of parental involvement in schools?

This research is aimed at exploring what the parental understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach, in a New Zealand Catholic Primary school setting. To date there is very little research available focussing on Reggio Emilia in the primary school context and in particular, on parental understanding. McClow and Gillespie (1998) investigated parental reactions to the introduction of Reggio Emilia Approach in a group of early childhood classrooms in the United States. Conclusions from that study included the need for clear on-going communication between parents and school. The researchers also found that parents wanted to know more about the approach and how they could become more involved. The importance of parent education was a strong finding in the research. This is reinforced by New (1994) who acknowledges the potential role of parents in a community of inquirers if they are clearly informed.

It is reported that significant educational, social and behavioural gains occur when effective partnerships between parents and teachers are established (Ramsey, Hawk, Harold, Marriott & Poskitt, 1993). The level of involvement that has the greatest influence and effect are when parents are involved in their child's learning at both home and school. Partnerships that are meaningful, well planned and comprehensive appear to be most effective. It is through strong teacher-parent relationships that parents learn about effective educational practices and how they can better support their child's learning at home (Berk, 2001; Billman, Geddes & Hedges, 2005; Domina, 2005; Ysseldyke & Christenson, 1993).

Educating a child involves considerable solidarity, support and sharing of ideas. Family involvement with sound partnerships between home and school educators is essential.

Teachers are not solely responsible for the development of rich, authentic learning experiences for students (Dettmer, Thurston & Dyck, 2005; Spaggiari, 1998), parents should be meaningful partners in their child's education too. Cooper and Christie (2005) argued that establishing true partnerships means empowering parents to articulate their needs and opinions so that schools could be sensitive to the values that influence parents' educational priorities and goals. Schools need to have practical approaches to improve the capacity to build meaningful partnership programmes (Lunenburg & Irby, 2002).

Researchers have found that the level of parental participation differs according to the cultural and ideological expectation of the parents and communities. This in turn is reflected in the policy and practice of the country (Tett, 2004). Crozier (1998, cited in Tett, 2004) commented on the policy statements of government of the United Kingdom that assume the working class parents wish to have little involvement with their child's education. This contrasts with the Japanese situation where a high level of parental involvement is the expectation (Tett, 2004). Parents are required to attend class meetings, observe the class in action and attend school activities. The parents do not however have a role in school governance or curriculum decision-making. In New Zealand parents are currently expected to participate in the governance of a school. Parent trustees are elected every three years (Ministry of Education, 1993). The New Zealand Curriculum Framework clearly indicates that parental input is sought and expected (McGee, 1997) and the soon to be implemented curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006) extends on this expectation of parental involvement. It concludes that genuine and constructive home-school partnerships, and programmes that enhance understandings of how parents can support their child educationally, are major influences that impact on children's achievement (Ministry Of Education, 2003). As a school principal working in a context

where Reggio Emilia principles informed our practice I subscribe to similar understandings. I wanted to study how parents in my school understood the approach and the part they could play in educating their children within this context? Rather than being merely linked to schools through their children, parents in Reggio Schools are considered a fundamental part of them. The education of children in Reggio Emilia is seen as a shared responsibility and everyone is expected to be an active participant (Thornton & Brunton, 2005). My interpretation is that for a school to truly embrace the Reggio Emilia approach it is important to determine whether the parent community's understanding of the approach leads to the kind of teaching and learning partnerships characteristic of it. This study sought to examine the parental understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia approach in a particular primary school. This information could be valuable to the school community for future curriculum design. This is in keeping with the expectations of the new draft curriculum. In addition, it may be valuable to other primary school communities who have also introduced the Reggio Emilia approach or plan to do so in the future.

Method

Methodology

The aim of a research project depends primarily on the paradigm that guides it (Sarantakos 2005). As a researcher I wanted to explore and explain the views and opinions of the parent participants. I wanted to develop an understanding of what is meaningful and relevant for these parents and what their experiences are (Neuman, 2003). Therefore the most appropriate mode of inquiry was interpretivist, as I wanted to develop an understanding of a particular social setting (our school community) and see “it from the point of view of those within it” (Neuman, 2003, p.69). Researchers who take an interpretivist approach, believe in an openness in understanding people and that rich descriptions of the world are valuable. An interpretivistic approach to this research meant I was to gather qualitative rather than quantitative data and my research strategies and analysis were to be qualitatively informed.

Focus Groups

To gain an insight of the views and opinions of these parents, the method of data collection was a focus group interview. The inquiry nature of focus groups allows for qualitatively rich data that can enlighten and challenge thinking about an existing practice (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The interactive nature of focus groups can lead to participants giving informative reasons as to how they feel about the areas of interest in what is usually a non-threatening, safe and comfortable environment (Krueger, 1988; Madriz, 2000). The focus group can lead to unstructured conversations that are not controlled by the facilitator. Often the discussion from members of the focus group highlights significant data that may not have been identified in an individual interview situation that

is facilitator driven (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Krueger, 1988; Madiz, 2000). As facilitator, it was important that I managed the focus group discussion process carefully to allow all opinions to be heard and that individual participants did not dominate or influence conversation (Krueger, 1988). Before the interview commenced I articulated with the group that there was no right or wrong point of view and for participants to share their opinions even if they were not that of other participants (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1997).

Participants

The criteria for participant selection in the focus group, was that their children currently attend St. Lucy Catholic School. After gaining permission from the school's acting principal and Board of Trustees, I approached potential parent participants via a general school newsletter and invited interested parents to participate. The first six respondents were then selected as participants. Having six participants is a desired size for a focus group as it is considered large enough to include diverse perspectives and small enough to allow full participation by each member (Krueger, 1988; Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Setting

The context for this research was a small urban New Zealand Catholic Primary School that has implemented the Reggio Emilia Approach. The setting for the focus group interview was in a neutral venue of the meeting room of a neighbouring school. The well-ventilated meeting room space was roomy enough to comfortably seat the focus group participants around an oval conference table. The table shape allowed all participants to be positioned so they would be able to interact in an unobstructed manner. I sat at the head of the table to position myself in a place where I would be able to

maintain eye contact with all participants and in doing so be able to easily communicate with them all (Morgan, 1997). It also gave me space for documenting the focus group discussion. The focus group interview was scheduled from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Procedure for the Focus Group

I facilitated the focus group process. When the focus group first assembled, I reviewed with the group the format for the day and what the focus group would entail. I then reviewed with the group the participant information sheet and highlighted any ethical considerations. The following process then occurred. I informed the group that there were to be five sub questions posed during the discussion to investigate the main research question “What are the parental understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach in a small New Zealand Catholic School?” These sub questions were:

- How do parents explain/understand their contribution to curriculum design and implementation in a primary school?
- What do parents know about the Reggio Emilia approach?
- What do parents like/dislike about the Reggio Emilia approach?
- What do parents see as the benefits of the Reggio Emilia approach?
- How do parents explain the role they play in the implementing of curriculum according to Reggio Emilia principles?

As each sub question was posed time was given for the participants to quietly reflect on the question and write their thoughts on paper. After constructing their individual thoughts the participants were invited to share and discuss their responses with the whole group. A series of prompt questions were given to probe further thoughts and discussion

from the participants, pertaining to each of the sub-questions. These probing questions are included in the focus group interview guidelines (APPENDIX FIVE). I facilitated the discussion and the participant responses were written on larger sheets of paper. I also took anecdotal notes throughout the day. At the conclusion of each session the participants reviewed the large paper notes to ensure that comments had been accurately recorded. This review enabled opportunity for additional participant comments. The participants' individual notes recording their ideas or thoughts, were collected for analysis.

Ethical Matters

As the method of data collection was to be a focus group interview involving six participants, it was necessary to get ethical approval. Ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of social research. As I am usually principal of the school, (I was on leave from this position throughout the duration of the research project) it was necessary to draw to the attention with the school's acting principal, BOT chairperson and all participants that I was undertaking this project as a researcher and not in my role as principal. As researcher I desired to produce an authentic description and understanding of the participants' experiences. It must be acknowledged that I do normally work in the school and this could be seen to indicate possible bias towards the research. Throughout the research I strived to remain as neutral as possible and not allow my previous experiences or personal relationships with the participants shape the outcome of the research. Krueger and Casey 2000 stress the importance that if the facilitator has a personal interest in the topic to keep personal views to themselves and "focus on understanding the perceptions of the group participants" (p.100). I did however highlight to them that the information gained from the research might be

beneficial to me as principal, and to the wider community, during future curriculum development.

A number of ethical factors were considered in developing the research. In the selection and involvement of participants, I ensured that full information about the purpose and uses of the data derived from the participants' contributions was given. I negotiated access to participants by gaining the consent of the acting principal and Board of Trustees Chairperson (APPENDIX ONE) who were given an information sheet outlining the project (APPENDIX TWO). Once permission was granted I then invited potential participants through the school newsletter. The first six participant respondents were chosen. This resulted in six parents being selected as participants who were provided with a participant information sheet that explained the work I was planning, my data collection methods and the uses for the information (APPENDIX THREE). In the document I informed participants that I would not reveal the name of the school or the participants in the study. As the data collection method was a focus group I was not able to ensure confidentiality. Participants needed to be encouraged to keep confidential what they heard during the focus group and I had the responsibility to anonymise data from the group. A particular ethical issue to consider in the case of focus groups is the handling of sensitive material and confidentiality given that there will always be more than one participant in the group. At the outset I needed to clarify that each participant's contributions were to be shared with the others in the group. The information sheet also outlined that if anyone wished to withdraw from the focus group at any time, they could do so, however they could not withdraw the information given. Once the participants were fully informed about the project and had time to answer any questions, I asked them to sign a consent form which along with any research information would be kept in a

locked secure place for six years, before being destroyed (APPENDIX FOUR). Prior to the focus group commencing, I reviewed the participant information sheet with them, to ensure that they were fully informed and had the opportunity to ask further questions. As I was researcher and also the facilitator of the focus group, I needed to ensure that I employed good facilitation skills, so that I did not influence the focus group in any way (Garmston, 2004; Schwarz, 2002; Weaver and Farrell, 1997). This was outlined in my focus group guidelines (APPENDIX FIVE).

Quality Design

There were three methods to collect the data: 1. Notes written by the participants in response to the research sub questions were collected. 2. Key points of the group feedback discussion were recorded onto large sheets of paper. 3. Anecdotal notes that I made during the day. The data was triangulated. This increases reliability. Interpretivist researchers value reliability. They believe reliability is strengthened by triangulation as if the different sources of information are saying the same thing, then the researcher has more confidence that the findings are valid and that the results reflect the views and opinions of the people involved in the study (Davidson & Tolich, 2003).

Data Coding and Analysis

In analysing the data gained from the focus group interview I reflected on the intent and purpose of the research (Krueger, 1988; Krueger & Casey, 2000). I wanted to know what a group of parent participants from a small New Zealand Catholic primary school perceived they knew about the Reggio Emilia Approach. I read the participants' responses to the five sub questions. I looked for words, utterances and ideas that were repeated by participants. I listed these in descriptive responses categories. Descriptive

response categories are based on the descriptive phrases or words with common characteristics, used by participants as they responded to the questions (Krueger, 1998). An example was “school family.” I coded to this category words or phrases that spoke of the school community as a family. Once I had read the data in this manner I re-read the extracted pieces of text to see if I could distinguish any themes across them. I found twenty-one themes. I wrote these twenty-one themes in a table and decided what types of words and phrases might be coded to any one of them. I had a theme called parent participation. Any phrase or statement that connected parents to participation or involvement in school activity was coded to this theme. For example, “parents are encouraged to be involved in their child’s school life”. Having decided the themes, I re-coded the relevant extracted text from the descriptive response categories. Once I had completed this process I looked at these themes for evidence of *frequency, specificity, extensiveness and emotion* to help me decide how much weight or emphasis to give to themes (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In considering the frequency and extensiveness of a theme I was aware that I must not assume that although a theme may have emerged frequently, it was not necessarily the most important. I noted how many different people said something about a particular theme and also considered how many times something was said. I was aware however that “sometimes a really key insight might have been said only once” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p.136). This I considered important due to the small size of the research group. I especially considered the themes that were specific and provided detail about Reggio Emilia, and those themes where the participants showed emotion, enthusiasm, passion, or intensity in their answers. On this basis I identified seven themes that reliably spoke to my question of parental understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia approach in this particular New Zealand Catholic Primary School. The themes are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Key descriptive theme codes used for data analysis

<i>Theme/Code</i>	<i>Descriptor – kinds of words, phrases or utterances participants used that I coded to the theme</i>
<p>Parent participation Any phrase or comment that connects parents with participation or involvement in school activity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending parent meetings • Attending parent interviews • Participating in surveys • Participating in strategic planning • Parent help in classroom and around school • Involvement in school activities • Contributing/suggesting ideas/projects • Discussion with teachers • Collaboration
<p>Community involvement Any phrase or comment that connects the school community, other children, families and the wider community to reciprocal learning in the education of the child</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonging to a community • Involvement by the wider community, other parents, other children • Peer tutoring • Support from teacher, parents others
<p>Documentation of teaching and learning Any phrase or comment that communicates the use of documentation to facilitate learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct quotes, writing of children • Evidence of Child’s own voice • Diaries/records of learning • Photos/transcripts/charts of learning • Children’s art
<p>Flexible Curriculum Any phrase or comment about curriculum content, curriculum process and characteristics of curriculum.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking tools • Adaptation of curriculum • Incorporating areas of learning – reading, writing, maths, art • Projects • Research • Incorporating a variety of skills • Flexibility of learning
<p>Aesthetics Any phrase or comment that communicates an appreciation the nature of the physical environment and its role in promoting learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music • Natural light • Cosy areas • Use of space in room • Colour • Children’s work displays • Classroom environment

Child initiated learning

Any phrase or comment that shows learning activities initiated from the child's standpoint, communicating the curiosity of children in seeking and exploring learning experiences and in being a constructor and co-constructor of their own knowledge

- Learning by doing
- Children having a passion for learning
- Child driven tasks, projects
- Celebrating children's curiosity
- Taking and developing children's ideas
- Children leading tasks
- Expressing individuality
- Appreciating individual strengths

Child confidence-independence

Any phrase or comment that communicates understandings of children's awareness of themselves as learners.

- Children as confident learners
- Fostering independent learners
- Empowering the child
- Developing self awareness as a learner

Results from the Data and Emerging Themes

The purpose of the data gathering was to find out “What are the parental perceptions and understandings of the Reggio Emilia approach in a small New Zealand Catholic School?” The aim was to explore and explain the views and opinions of the parents and in doing so develop an understanding of what is meaningful to them about the Reggio Emilia approach and its relevance to them in a New Zealand primary school setting. This chapter reports the data gathered from a focus group discussion with parents. It is structured around seven key themes that emerged from the focus group discussion and that illuminate parent understandings of Reggio Emilia as it plays out in their children’s school. Where appropriate direct quotes or statements have been used as data. These have been referenced from participants’ written note responses to questions, focus group discussion comments and research anecdotal notes. Examples of the referencing used is as follows: (Q1.P1.3) refers to “*Question 1, Parent 1, Response 3*” whereas (Q2.FG.7) refers to “Question 2, Focus Group, Comment 7.”

Parent Participation

Parental participation emerged overwhelmingly as the most frequent and extensive theme spoken by the parents in the focus group. Parents talked about participating in curriculum implementation, curriculum design, the way parental involvement supported Reggio Emilia principles and the idea of sharing expertise.

Four of the participants commented that helping out in the classroom or other school programmes is one way that they contribute. Specific examples of this contribution were: *giving assistance in school programmes such as Developing our Talents* (Q1.P4.5);

being a parent help (Q1.P4.1); helping in class reading and maths lessons (Q1.P3.2); going on school excursions (Q1.P5.2).

One parent also suggested their attendance at parent interviews was a way that they contribute to curriculum implementation. Parental involvement and support in the school Parent Teachers and Friends Association [PTFA], was also voiced. By supporting the PTFA fundraising, parents considered they were helping the Board of Trustees [BOT] in developing programmes in the school.

All these comments show awareness of how parents contribute to curriculum *already developed* at school. This is significant because in Reggio Emilia schools parents are also expected to contribute to curriculum design. Only one parent spoke of how parents can contribute to the design of curriculum in our school and even then the contribution was at the strategic level, not the level of classroom practice. She said, *“Feedback through parent surveys, board meetings, strategic planning and review all affect new frameworks developed by the BOT”* (Q1.FG.15) contributed to curriculum design. This parent questioned whether the wider parent community were actually aware that they could contribute to curriculum design saying *“Are parents aware they are invited to meetings and can contribute?”* (Q1.FG.16).

The question of possible lack of parental awareness or understanding of how parents might contribute to curriculum was reflected in another parent’s written comment *“I feel that schools perform autonomously when it comes to curriculum, that parents have little or no change or influence in the mainstream curriculum”* (Q1.P2.1). During the

discussion this parent said *“Curriculum design is a speciality area so how can parents be involved”* (Q1.FG.6).

The importance of parent participation and involvement was highlighted as a benefit of Reggio Emilia. One parent commented, *“Parents are involved with their child’s school life”* (Q4. P3.3). This parent also noted the *“parent role as first teacher is acknowledged and celebrated”* (Q4.P3.4). Another parent also expressed parent participation as a benefit by saying *“as a parent I feel in touch with my child’s learning”* (Q4.P6.4). A third parent said, *“Parents are encouraged to be involved in their child’s school life – positive early experiences continue”* (Q4.FG.4).

Parents talked about how their participation supported the Reggio Emilia principles at St. Lucy’s Catholic School. Participation in school based events and activities was expressed as one avenue: *“supporting their child and school by going to school events”* (Q5.P1.3); *“classroom involvement, bringing ideas or interests into the classroom”* (Q5.P5.1); and *“supporting the teacher with activities and curriculum”* (Q5.P5.6). Two parents saw their involvement starts at home *“involvement in a child’s education starts at home where ideas can take hold and develop into ideas for curriculum design”* (Q5.P2.2). The second parent said it is *“following through with the ideas at home”* (Q5.P6.3).

Sharing expertise was another form of parental involvement that was spoken in the research. One parent said *“suggesting ideas to the teacher and at PTFA meetings ... [was a way to be involved as well as]...getting ideas from other parents and suggesting these”* (Q5.P1.1), while a second parent commented that they shared expertise by *“informing and discussing child’s interests with the teachers –informing teachers,*

helping them to gain a better understanding” (Q5.FG.8). Parents also noted the importance of sharing their expertise to aid the implementation of curriculum for example *“by facilitating projects/research e.g. taking children to the library”* (Q5.P4.4), and *“parents can offer their strengths to the teacher”* (Q5.FG.2). Interestingly the expectation for strong parental participation was expressed as a dislike of Reggio Emilia by one parent. She said that Reggio Emilia *“relies on parental support and involvement which can be difficult for some to generate this support”* (Q3.FG.18).

Community Involvement

Community involvement emerged as a second theme during the focus group. Parents talked about building and celebrating a sense of community, the input of the wider community in building learning and the positive impact of this on whole school community, how through community involvement curriculum contribution occurs, and that a confidence to contribute evolves from this sense of community.

When discussing with the participants what they know about the Reggio Emilia approach, five of the six participants repeated community involvement was important and they developed these ideas further in the group discussion. They made comments that *“Reggio Emilia celebrates family”* (Q2.P2.5), *“there is a sense of belonging to the community”* (Q3.FG.18), and that *“the community, family and school are seen as a whole”* (Q3.P6.3). One parent commented that *“parents, teachers, environment and child all work together”* (Q3.FG.21) and comments were made on the partnerships and support between old and young and by the *“scaffolding by others”* (Q3.FG.7). Wider community involvement through visits to community places like the public library and pool was also commented on.

Two parents spoke of the community involvement as an aspect of Reggio Emilia they particularly like. One of these parents specified the supportive nature of the approach for children and said *“they have a feeling that they are part of something and also the family as a whole”* (Q3.P6.2). The second parent mentioned the peer scaffolding that occurs through community involvement with children building on their learning through their interaction with their peers in collaborative situations.

Similarly four participants highlighted the benefit of community involvement in the Reggio Emilia approach. One comment made was *“the children and parents enjoy the school and community approach”* (Q4.P1.3) while a second parent said they appreciated how the school was *“part of a strong and supportive community”* (Q4.FG.10). A parent considered that the community involvement in a Reggio Emilia school means *“they get to know about other families/parents as part of their learning”* (Q4.P6.3), while another found it beneficial that in Reggio Emilia schools, *“children learn from teachers – and others – families, experts”* (Q4.FG.6).

Participants made a connection between community involvement and curriculum implementation. One said, *“being part of the school community helps parents feel at ease when suggesting new curriculum ideas”* (Q5.P2.1), and another commented that, *“parents as part of the school community can go into the school with suggestions and ideas for programmes”* (Q5.FG.1). This is important, as parents may be more likely to contribute to curriculum implementation if they feel welcome and valued. As one parent acknowledged, the *“parent role is critical to Reggio Emilia”*(Q5.FG.9). Significantly during the discussion the parents suggested that groups of St. Lucy’s Catholic school parents could in the future come together to share ideas and information about Reggio

Emilia principles saying “[focus group] *participants could share topics of discussion with class/parent communities*” (Q5.FG.17). This is in keeping with the Reggio Emilia principle of the whole community coming together to develop and plan strategies.

Documentation of Teaching and Learning

The documentation of teaching and learning was a third theme spoken by the parents in the focus group. The parents spoke about examples of documentation, how documentation makes learning visible and the place of documentation as assessment. When articulating what the participants knew about the Reggio Emilia approach, four participants commented extensively on the importance of documenting teaching and learning. They were able to speak of a variety of examples of documentation they had encountered as parents of the school. One parent wrote “*documentation by teachers very important – diaries, photographs and written charts/posters*”(Q2.P4.3) while a second parent spoke of documentation as “*photos and activities with transcripts with what the child has said*”(Q2.P3.8). One parent commented that documentation was about the child saying the “*children’s own work and voice is evident*” (Q2.FG.10), while another parent said documentation shows children’s learning with “*direct quotes/writing from children*” (Q2.P4.10).

The place of documentation as assessment was noted with one parent saying, “*documentation gives assessment without doing tests*” (Q2.FG.24), while another stated it “*documents child’s learning.*” (Q2.P2.6). The theme of documentation also emerged as a dislike when one parent expressed concern that there is a “*lack of empirical information*” (Q3.FG.19). She thought there was an absence of formal tests. She questioned how the Reggio Emilia forms of documentation show “*knowledge of*

children's level of achievement" (Q3.FG.20) and that this is "*a draw back – as there is no test knowing that your child is going OK – if they had to move schools would they be at the same stage*" (Q3.P3.5). The importance of documentation making learning visible was highlighted, but the parent comments did not relate this to the Reggio Emilia principle of documentation as a planning tool for educators and parents.

Flexible Curriculum

The theme of a flexible curriculum also emerged from the focus group discussion. The parents spoke of a curriculum that emerges from child curiosity, the adaptation in classroom programmes, children as researchers and the curriculum allowing children to utilise and extend thinking skills.

The flexibility of curriculum development within a Reggio Emilia classroom was commented on. One participant noted that within Reggio Emilia "*there are no set outcomes – able to change to meet interests of children*" (Q2.P3.4). Furthermore she stated Reggio Emilia "*allows the child to develop an interest and follow and research it rather than stick to rigid guidelines*" (Q2.P3.6), and that it "*incorporates writing, reading and maths skills into project work*" (Q2.P3.7). The participants spoke of the flexibility of curriculum as a benefit of Reggio Emilia. One parent commented, "*The teachers are able to be adaptive with the school curriculum*" (Q4.P1.1), while another said that it allows "*academic success without rigidity*" (Q4.P2.3).

The parents also expressed their like for the flexible curriculum evident in Reggio Emilia classrooms. One parent considered "*it develops critical thinking skills that prepare the children for later life*" (Q3.FG.12). Two parents defined the benefits of flexibility as a

means for the child to learn and use skills that will aid their future learning. One of these parents noted that the children “*Learn how to learn i.e. how to find answers through research, questioning, i.e. critical thinking, problem solving*” (Q4.P3.2). The second parent wrote about flexibility of curriculum as “*writing a whole project/or carrying one out – e.g. building something – incorporating a lot of skills*” (Q4.P4.5).

Aesthetics

In Reggio Emilia schools it is considered important that the classrooms are aesthetically beautiful and that the environment is used as a third teacher. Some parents highlighted in the focus group discussion the theme of the aesthetics in Reggio Emilia classrooms. They gave comments on the importance of children’s work being displayed, having natural light, cosy areas and music and art. In response to questions where I asked what parents knew about Reggio Emilia one parent said, “*art and work [is] on display in classrooms and in areas around the school*” (Q2.P3.5). As an example of attention to the aesthetics, one parent said “*they place music, have natural lights and lots of pictures*” (Q2.P2.9).

A few parents commented on the flexibility of the environment in Reggio Emilia classrooms, specifically when stating the aspects of the aesthetics of environment. Their comments were more general however when stating what they like about it, just listing “*classroom environment*” (Q3.P4.4), as their response. The use of the term environment was also ambiguous as some parents highlighted their like for “*environmental awareness*” (Q3.P5.6); “*valuing the environment*” (Q4.P2.6); the use of “*natural resources like at play centre*” (Q3.P1.2); and “*no plastics*” (Q2.P5.5), when discussing the classroom environments. These comments indicated a passing assumption by the parents that part of the Reggio Emilia pedagogy is to be environmentally aware. It could

be that the parents have previously heard the term *environment as third teacher* and they have interpreted the term in this manner.

Child Initiated Learning

The theme of child initiated learning was expressed in commentary on knowledge about Reggio Emilia. The parents spoke of children initiating their own learning, children taking the lead in learning, the celebration of children as individuals and the freedom to develop and explore own strengths and talents.

The strongest emerging theme regarding parental knowledge about Reggio Emilia was that of child initiated learning. Five participants gave descriptors that indicated their awareness of this being an important component of the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia. Comments were varied with one parent saying that a Reggio Emilia classroom has “*child initiated tasks*” (Q2.FG.5). A second parent extended this idea saying learning is “*child led, supported and guided by the teacher*” (Q2.P3.2), while another spoke of “*taking kids ideas and developing these as a basis for curriculum*” (Q2.P4.2). A fourth parent commented that the children are “*learning by doing and documenting this*” (Q2.FG.17).

The parents spoke of the celebration of child initiated learning as “*learning with a passion what interests children*” (Q2.P6.5) and that it “*celebrates children’s innate curiosity – school gives them tools to work through their ideas*” (Q2.FG.22). Four parents particularly like the pedagogy of the child initiated emergent curriculum. One parent said, “*I like that the child can express their individuality through the children leading tasks*” (Q3.P1.1).

Other parents emphasised they like that the child is central to all learning. Similarly another participant expressed she likes everything as *“learning is about the child”* (Q3.FG.11). She further commented that through this the child develops the *“inner confidence to move forward”* (Q3.FG.10).

The theme of child initiated learning was also expressed as a benefit of Reggio Emilia. Two parents expressed they saw the scope for individuality as a benefit commenting, *“the children can express their individuality at school”* (Q4.P1.2), and there is *“an appreciation for individual strengths”* (Q4.P2.4). Another parent saw as a benefit that Reggio Emilia is *“multi-dimensional – every child can excel in certain areas”* (Q4.FG.8). There is *“allowance for pupils to be themselves and develop from where they are currently at –building on strengths and interests”* (Q4.FG.9).

Child Confidence and Independence

A final theme exemplified ideas around children as confident, capable and independent learners. Parents spoke of children developing confidence as learners, developing independence by being supported in their learning at home and school, and through being confident learners; the children are also respectful learners.

This key theme of child confidence and independence emerged during the discussion on curriculum implementation and also relating to the benefits of Reggio Emilia. One parent strongly considered that child confidence and independence develops as result of parents contributing at school and home to their child’s learning. It is *“good for children’s confidence to see their ideas are taken seriously”* (Q1.FG.22). The parents considered there does need to be a balance between parent support and child independence

especially as the child develops, to keep being involved and informed. A comment made was “*as pupils develop they do become more independent but parents have responsibilities as children mature to see how the learning programmes are moving*” (Q1.FG.27).

The participants contributed statements that strongly indicated the theme of child confidence and independence as a benefit of Reggio Emilia. Evidence of this were statements such as Reggio Emilia is “*giving them the life skill and confidence*” (Q4.P2.2), and “*it is making children better people who accept differences*” (Q4.P2.7). Parents consider this confidence leads the children into being respectful of others’ learning with one saying the “*child feels empowered, confident, also respectful of others opinions, as result of their opinions being valued*” (Q4.P3.1). The parents consider Reggio Emilia principles help develop child independence saying it “*fosters independence – diversity of product – leads to learning outcomes*” (Q4.FG.7), and that the “*children are confident to develop*” (Q4.P6.6) as learners.

Discussion

As stated at the outset, the intent of this research was to examine what were the parental perceptions and understandings of the Reggio Emilia approach in a small New Zealand Catholic primary school. From the research, I sought to establish whether the parent community has an accurate understanding of this approach and their particular role in the parent-school partnership at a Reggio Emilia school. I also wanted to establish whether the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum did meet the needs of their particular community.

As the parent participants shared their perceptions and understandings it became apparent that they all shared positive views towards the Reggio Emilia approach. Although it appeared that the participants had some accurate understandings of the underlying principles of Reggio Emilia, there also appeared to be misunderstandings about some of its unique characteristics.

Parent Participation

Results from the focus group data indicated that the participants had a developing understanding that parent participation and contribution is both expected and valued in Reggio Emilia schools. This mirrors the literature where it is well documented that parents in Reggio Emilia are authentically respected and valued as partners in the education process (Dennis & Marchenko, 2005; Fraser, 2000; Thornton & Brunton, 2005). It is how the parents saw their participation and contribution role that is most interesting. The parents mainly saw their role as aiding and assisting the teachers in the implementation of curriculum by supporting their child's learning. The parents appreciated the opportunity for involvement in classroom and school activity. They were

encouraged that they are acknowledged as their child's first teacher and they can contribute to curriculum by helping their child researching interests. The participants regarded this involvement as an intrinsic way they can remain in touch and help foster their child's learning. This perceived benefit of active school involvement was reported in Berk (2001) who said when parents are involved in school activities their children show better academic progress. The positive influence of parental partnership was also reiterated in Ramsey et al (1993).

However, in both Reggio Emilia and New Zealand, the expectation is for the parental participation to go beyond general assistance and collaboration in school activity. In Reggio Emilia parents are expected to be part of the school not just playing a part in it, by being actively involved in decision making (Thornton & Brunton, 2005). In New Zealand parents are encouraged to contribute to the unique curriculum design that a school develops (Ministry of Education, 2006). Only one parent participant indicated an understanding of how parents can contribute to a school's curriculum design through such avenues as participation in strategic planning, completing curriculum surveys and attending community meetings. Conversely another participant considered parents couldn't contribute adequately to curriculum design, as it is a specialised area requiring expertise, and suggests that schools really work independently in this. Parent contribution through PTFA meetings was touched on but this was not in relation to curriculum design but purely as a means of participation. McClow and Gillespie (1998) highlighted in their research that parents often don't know how they can make contributions and parents would appreciate education about Reggio Emilia principles and the scope of parental involvement. This was also reflected in these research findings with the comment that

maybe parents just don't know that they are allowed to contribute. The implications of better parent information and education will be discussed further later in the report.

Community Involvement

This research found that the parents appreciated the way the family is embraced by the approach and that there is a strong sense of belonging to a community through being part of a Reggio Emilia school. They were aware that the local community was often an extension of the classroom with visits to places such as the local library and swimming pool and also the utilisation of other adults and children as teachers. The participants' value using the resources of the wider community and they recognised that meaningful experiences can be brought back into the classroom for further learning.

Fundamental to the Reggio Emilia approach is the reciprocal relationships between children, teachers, family and the wider community (Dennis & Marchenko, 2005; Thornton & Brunton, 2005). The whole community has a stake in the education of the child. Carlina Rinaldi (2006) expressed that being part of a community is essential to the learning processes of a child and adults. That being part of a common journey helps construct the meaning of belonging to the community. Similarly Loris Malaguzzi (1993) believed "children learn by interacting with their environment and actively transforming their relationships with the world of adults, things, events, and peers (p.11)." The scaffolding of learning from peers and adults was also highlighted in the research as why parents like Reggio Emilia. The parent participants like the supportive nature of Reggio Emilia and how scaffolding in learning occurs through the community involvement. An important principle of Reggio Emilia is the sharing of information with parents and teachers (Forman & Fyfe, 1998). This research found that parents consider the sense of

belonging to a community enables them to feel more at ease in suggesting ideas with the school. This was especially so when discussing curriculum matters.

Documentation of Teaching and Learning

This research found parents value highly the documentation of learning. Their comments reflected an understanding that documentation is more than just displaying the children's work, that it provides parents and teachers information about the children. A key principle of the Reggio Emilia approach is the documentation of teaching and learning (Gandini, 1997; Katz, 1998). Documentation makes the learning visible (Rinaldi, 2006). The parent participants in this research acknowledge that it provides more than a display tool, as it encompasses such evidence as examples of children's work, photographs of the learning and transcripts of learning conversations (Rinaldi, 2006; Tarini, 1997). Their comments showed they saw documentation as a communication tool informing them as parents, about children's learning.

This research found that the parents had a general understanding that documentation of learning is a form of assessment. It is important to mention here however, that the use of traditional testing tools e.g. standardised tests were still perceived necessary by one participant as assessment tools. This perception maybe due to Reggio Emilia being used as a curriculum approach in a primary school setting where traditionally other forms of assessment tools are often used. Although the parents recognised documentation as being an information source for them and for teachers, the place of documentation in Reggio Emilia schools to provoke and plan future teaching and learning was not articulated.

Flexible Curriculum

It is apparent from the responses of the focus group participants that these parents appreciate teachers adapting the curriculum and learning experiences to meet the interests of the children. The parents liked the manner in which the children can utilise a range of skills and learn by finding out their own answers.

The Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum is often called an emergent curriculum as it emerges from the children's ideas and interests (Gandini, 1997; Katz 1998). The parents in this research spoke of how projects or topics of study may emerge as the children develop interests, ask questions or discover new problems to solve. They commented on Reggio Emilia as a flexible curriculum that has an inquiry learning focus that the teachers can be adaptive with. This is also reflected in other Reggio Emilia literature that considers through observation, listening and dialogue teachers, may provoke new learning experiences (Gandini, 1997; Katz 1998). My project found these parents particularly like the inquiry focus of learning; that children are encouraged to be researchers in their own learning.

The parents in this research also like that Reggio Emilia does not conform to the rigidity of a structured curriculum. While the previous curriculum framework did state it enabled flexibility in curriculum coverage and for schools to design programmes responsive to student learning needs, there was an expectation to cover all the curriculum objectives (Ministry of Education, 1993). The new draft curriculum document allows communities to design their own curriculum based on local preferences. This research's finding of strong parental appreciation of the flexibility of the Reggio Emilia approach is then likely to be incorporated in this community's future curriculum design.

Aesthetics

This research found that the parent participants' perception of the importance of aesthetics in Reggio Emilia schools was mainly in making the school environment an amiable place for children to be. The environment is seen as more than this in Reggio Emilia schools. It is considered to be the third teacher or "third educator" (Gandini, 1998, p.177). A flexible environment is established that considers aesthetics such as space and light and is continually responsive and adaptive to the children's construction of knowledge. In developing the environment, care is taken to consider the children's needs. Attention is also given to designing an environment that functional and aesthetically attractive (Gandini, 1998; Millikan, 2003). Although the parents commented on the aesthetics of Reggio School they did not relate this to being an environment responsive and adaptive to the learning needs of the children.

While the participant comments showed an awareness of the phrase "environment as a third teacher" their interpretations were however more about making the physical environment attractive and also the ecological importance of caring for the environment. The comments did not consider the phrase from the important Reggio Emilia pedagogical perspective of children using the environment as a meaningful place to construct learning. This finding was also similarly reflected in the research by Ardzejeewska and Coutts (2004) who found that some Australian teachers considered they were 'doing Reggio' if the environment was pleasant rather than the environment being used to construct learning. The implications from this research is that further information needs to be communicated to parents as to the Reggio Emilia pedagogical rationale for the phrase "environment as third teacher" and specifically the place of aesthetics within this pedagogy.

Child Initiated Learning

This research found the parent participants had a good understanding of the Reggio Emilia approach to learning. They articulated clearly that children initiate their own learning opportunities and that the teachers support and co-construct this learning. Within Reggio Emilia the child is seen as a protagonist, collaborator, and communicator. Children are able to construct and develop new knowledge based on their experiences and communicate these in multiple ways, commonly known in Reggio Emilia as the “hundred languages of children” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Gandini, 1997). The parent comments in this research showed a considered interpretation that the children in this Reggio Emilia school are encouraged to construct their own learning across a broad range of experiences according to their interests and strengths. This reflects the literature by the Reggio writers that guided this research. Although they did not articulate the phrase “the hundred languages of children” this research considers the parent participants do perceive the Reggio Emilia approach allows for children to initiate and express their learning through mediums that develop their strengths and individuality.

Child Confidence and Independence

This research found that parents want to see their children as confident, capable, independent learners. The Reggio Emilia approach embraces this too. In Reggio Emilia the image of the child is central to the pedagogy. Reggio Emilia educators clearly express their view that all children have the potential and ability to engage in meaningful and respectful relationships and experiences that construct new learning (Gandini, 1997; Milikan, 2003; Rinaldi, 2006). The parents in this research perceive that the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum develops in their children, the confidence to construct and explore new learning. Like the Reggio Emilia educators, they consider the approach

empowers their children to be confident learners and respectful of others. The parent participants in this research believe that the Reggio Emilia approach develops child confidence that in turn can provoke further learning.

Implications for future practice

The findings of this research highlighted to the researcher that the parents at St. Lucy's Catholic School have some accurate understandings of the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum and that their perceptions of this approach to curriculum is positive. There are however, some misconceptions that would need to be addressed if they are to be fully capable contributors to the future curriculum implementation and design in the school according to Reggio Emilia principles.

Discussion with the parents indicated a need for more information from the school's educators about the approach. These parents consider that being better informed about the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia is important if they are to be fully involved in future curriculum design. They implied that not only are the school's educators responsible for any parent education, but they as parents can also contribute to this process through facilitating group discussion. A challenge for this researcher could be to implement an informative parent education programme on the principles of Reggio Emilia that utilises both parents and educators as facilitators. This process could be a focus of future research.

Conclusion

It is clear that parental and family involvement is considered crucial in the education of children and is associated with stronger educational outcomes. Furthermore, parental involvement and participation is an expectation in the development of curriculum design in twenty-first century New Zealand schools. Parental involvement and participation is also an expectation of the curriculum approach of Reggio Emilia. Parents are expected to be active participants in the development of curriculum. The importance of parental participation and involvement in New Zealand primary schools that embrace the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum is therefore two-fold. The parent participants in this study acknowledge the importance of parental involvement.

This research also reinforced that the parents have a positive perception of the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum as it is taken at this school. They highlighted seven key themes that reflected a generalised knowledge and understanding on some of the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. The themes that emerged to indicate this parental knowledge and understanding were: parent participation; community involvement; documentation of teaching and learning; flexible curriculum, aesthetics; child initiated learning; and child confidence and independence. The results suggest that although the parents have a generalised understanding of the key principles of Reggio Emilia, there are some areas where better knowledge could be communicated more effectively. This researcher considers that for parents to fully understand their role in the development of curriculum in a school that implements Reggio Emilia, it is important that they have an informed understanding of the pedagogy.

The parent participants in this research consider the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum to be beneficial to their children in their development as learners. They acknowledge the importance of active parental involvement as a pivotal element of this. For parental involvement at St. Lucy's Catholic School to be effective, robust parent education in the principles of Reggio Emilia is considered necessary. This is especially so in light of the expected parent contribution to curriculum design and for determining whether the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum continues to meet the needs of the St. Lucy's Catholic School community.

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Principal and Board of Trustees Consent Form

**Parental Understandings and Perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach
in a small New Zealand Catholic Primary School**

This consent form will be securely stored for a period of six years before it is destroyed.

Researchers Name: Mary Kedzlie

- We have received detailed information about the research project.
- We understand that we may contact the research project supervisor at any time
- We understand that the school or parents will not be personally identified and measures will be taken to protect confidentiality. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, the school and parents will be given pseudonyms in any written report.

We consent to the participation of the parents in the research project. (Please complete below)

Name: _____ (Principal)

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Name: _____ (Board of Trustees
Chairperson)

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Principal & Board of Trustees Information Sheet

Parental Understandings and Perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach in a small New Zealand Catholic Primary School

Dear Board of Trustees Chairperson and Acting Principal,

I am an MTchLn student with the University of Canterbury. I am currently enrolled in EDTL802 and am required to complete a research project for this paper. It is my intention to undertake this research in the form of a small case study with current parents from your school. The focus of my research is to investigate their understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Central to the successful implementation of the Reggio Emilia Approach is parental involvement and partnership. This involvement and partnership is also an important expectation of the draft New Zealand Curriculum. The information gathered from this research could be valuable to the school community for future curriculum design. This is in keeping with the expectations of the new draft curriculum. In addition, it may be valuable to other primary school communities who have also introduced the Reggio Emilia Approach or plan to do so in the future.

I would like to ask for your permission to approach approximately six parents and invite them to be participants in this research. To gain an insight of the views and opinions of these parents about the Reggio Emilia Approach, I would like to facilitate a focus group meeting. Focus groups provide a forum for collecting a range of individual experiences around a selected issue or topic. It promotes the exchange of perspectives and the sharing of knowledge within a group and can enlighten and challenge thinking about an existing practice.

The focus group will convene for one day. I will facilitate the focus group process. A summary of the findings and implications will then be shared back to the group.

For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, the school and parents will be given a pseudonym in the final report. If the information provided is reported or published, it will be done in such a way that it does not identify the school or the participants.

It is important that I draw to your attention that I am undertaking this project from a researcher's perspective and not as my position as school principal. However, the information gained from the research may be beneficial to me as principal, and to the wider school community, as reference during future school curriculum development.

I would value your permission in allowing this investigation to proceed. If you agree, please sign the attached form and return it in the enclosed envelope by

_____. This form and all research information will be kept in a secure place for six years and used only for the purpose as described above.

The University of Canterbury, College of Education Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Complaints Procedure

The University requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to:

The Chair
Ethical Clearance Committee
University of Canterbury
College of Education
PO Box 31-065
Christchurch

Please feel free to contact me at any time to clarify matters or alternatively contact my supervisor

Alex Gunn.

School of Education Studies & Human Development,
University of Canterbury,
Private Bag 4800,
CHRISTCHURCH, NZ
Ph. 03 364 2987 exn.4929

Kind regards,

Mary Kedzlie
2/11 Faulkner Road
Northcote Point
North Shore City 1310

Ph 419 8077

Participant Information Sheet

Parental Understandings and Perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach in a small New Zealand Catholic Primary School

Dear Participant,

I am an MTchLn student with the University of Canterbury. I am currently enrolled in EDTL802 and am required to complete a research project for this paper. It is my intention to undertake this research in the form of a small case study with past and current parents from St. Leo's Catholic School. The focus of my research is to investigate their understandings and perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Central to the successful implementation of the Reggio Emilia Approach is parental involvement and partnership. This involvement and partnership is also an important expectation of the draft New Zealand curriculum. The information gathered from this research could be valuable to the school community for future curriculum design. This is in keeping with the expectations of the new draft curriculum. In addition, it may be valuable to other primary school communities who have also introduced the Reggio Emilia approach or plan to do so in the future.

I have received permission from the school's acting principal and Board of Trustees Chairperson, to conduct this study. I would like to invite you to be a participant in this case study to get your perspective on the research question. To gain an insight of the views and opinions of the participants about the Reggio Emilia Approach, I would like to facilitate a focus group meeting. Focus groups provide a forum for collecting a range of individual experiences around a selected issue or topic. It promotes the exchange of perspectives and the sharing of knowledge within a group and can enlighten and challenge thinking about an existing practice.

The focus group will convene for one day (9.30 am – 2.30 pm) and will comprise of four sessions each focusing on a particular question(s). I will facilitate the focus group process. You will be involved on two types of task. You will be asked to reflect individually and to respond in writing to questions about the school's approach to curriculum and you will participate in group discussions about the curriculum also. The data I collect will come from your written and verbal responses and from notes I will make during the day. After collecting, organizing and analysing the data, I will bring the data back to you and ask you to read them to ensure they accurately reflect your experiences and perspectives of the focus group. Finally I will summarise the findings and consider implications for future practice. These findings and implications will then be shared back to the group.

It is important that I draw to your attention that I am undertaking this project from a researcher's perspective and not as my position as school principal. However, the information gained from the research may be beneficial to me as principal, and to the wider school community, as reference during future school curriculum development.

For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, the school and participants will be given a pseudonym in the final report. If the information provided is reported or published, it will be done in such a way that it does not identify you or the school.

Also, for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, you will be given a pseudonym in any written materials from the project. As the research involves a focus group meeting, others involved will know you participated. All group members are being asked to respect

confidentiality. Confidentiality with respect to your identity cannot be guaranteed, but every endeavour will be made to protect this.

You have a right to withdraw from the project at any time prior to the analysis of final data (1.09.07). Past this date your contributions will be included in the final research report. If results were to be used for any other purpose than intended, permission would be sought.

You are under no obligation to participate, but I would value your contribution to this investigation. If you agree to participate in this project, please sign the attached form and return it in the enclosed envelope by August 10th. This form and all research information such as the collated notes, recordings and transcripts of the focus group discussions, will be kept in a secure place for six years and used only for the purpose as described above.

The University of Canterbury, College of Education Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Complaints Procedure

The University requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to:

The Chair
Ethical Clearance Committee
University of Canterbury
College of Education
PO Box 31-065
Christchurch

Please feel free to contact me at any time to clarify matters or alternatively contact my supervisor
Alex Gunn
School of Education Studies & Human Development,
University of Canterbury,
Private Bag 4800,
CHRISTCHURCH, NZ
Ph. 03 364 2987 exn.4929

I look forward to working with you.

Kind regards,

Mary Kedzlie
2/11 Faulkner Road
Northcote Point
North Shore City 1310

Ph 419 8077

Participant's Consent Form

**Parental Understandings and Perceptions of the Reggio Emilia Approach
in a small New Zealand Catholic Primary School**

This consent form will be securely stored for a period of six years before it is destroyed.

Researchers Name: Mary Kedzlie

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I have received detailed information about the research project.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research at any stage prior to the analysis of the data (1.09.07).
- I understand that past 1.09.07. contributions I have made to the data for the project will be included in the research's report.
- I understand that if results were to be used for any purpose other than those intended, my permission will be sought.
- I understand that this form and all research information including the collated notes of the focus group discussions will be kept in a secure place for six years before it is destroyed.
- I understand that I may contact the project supervisor at any time to clarify matters.
- I understand that I will not be personally identified and measures will be taken to protect my confidentiality. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, I will be given a pseudonym as direct quotes may be used in the final report.
- I understand that all information will be confidential and securely stored.
- I understand that permission has been given by my school acting principal and Board of Trustees chairperson allowing the researcher to approach me as a research participant.
- I understand I will be given an opportunity to read the data and to verify it for authenticity.
- I understand I will be given a summary of the findings and implications for future practice.

I consent to be a participant in the research project. (Please complete below)

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

APPENDIX FIVE: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDELINES.

DURATION: One day – 10.00 – 2.00

NUMBER IN FOCUS GROUP: 6 PARTICIPANTS.

POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS: 6 parents of students currently enrolled at the research focus school.

OUTLINE OF PROGRAMME:

Session One 10.00 – 10.40

1. Introductions. Review purpose of focus group, ethical considerations and programme. Review information on participant sheet.

Facilitator poses questions aimed at the first research question: *How do parents explain/understand their contribution to curriculum design and implementation in a primary school?*

How have you been involved in developing curriculum at this school?

Have you ever suggested to your child's teacher start a project in his/her class? If so, What was it?

Participants individually record their responses on paper. The participants will individually reflect on the question and constructing their own responses on paper.

2. After constructing their individual thoughts the participants will share their responses with the whole group. I will facilitate the group discussion.
3. Key points of the group feedback discussion will be recorded onto large sheets of paper.

MORNING TEA

Session Two 10.50 - 11.25

Facilitator poses next guiding question: *What do parents know about the Reggio Emilia Approach?*

Are you able to identify some of the physical elements that maybe visible in a Reggio Emilia School? - In the playground? - In the school foyer? - In the classrooms?

Are you able to identify some of the principles that are part of the Reggio Emilia Approach?

From your own experiences, what do you see as different in a Reggio classroom as opposed to a non- Reggio classroom?

Follow steps 2 & 3 of session 1.

Session three. 11.25 – 12.05

Facilitator poses next guiding question: *What do parents like/dislike about the Reggio Emilia Approach?*

What do like the changes in your child's classroom due to the Reggio Emilia approach?

What do you dislike about changes in your child's classroom due to the Reggio Emilia Approach?

Follow steps 2 & 3 of session 1.

LUNCH

Session four. 12.35 – 1.15

Facilitator poses next guiding questions:

What do parents see as the benefits of the Reggio Emilia Approach?

What do you see as positive aspects? Can you elaborate on that?

Follow steps 2 & 3 of session 1

Session five. 1.10 – 1.55

How do parents explain the role they play in the implementing curriculum according to Reggio Emilia principles?

What do know about the parent role in Reggio Emilia curriculum implementation?

Follow steps 2 & 3 of session 1

Conclusion of the Focus Group Process: 1.55– 2.00

PROMPTS

Can you give me another example of this?

Really!

Go on!

Tell me more!

I don't understand, can you elaborate?

Could you be more specific?

When?

How?

ROLE OF FACILITATOR

- To promote debate, by asking open questions.
- Challenge participants, especially to draw out differences, and tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic under discussion.
- Move things forward when the conversation is drifting or has reached a minor conclusion.
- Keep the session focused and steer the conversation back on course if needed.
- Ensure everyone participates and gets a chance to speak.
- Not show too much approval, so as to avoid favouring particular participants.
- Avoid giving personal opinions so as not to influence participants towards any particular position or opinion.