

# Early Education Commission

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## Research Abstract

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### Abstract

Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia are three approaches to early childhood education that have been considered “progressive” and from which have sprung numerous studies, articles, books and imitators worldwide. They have many elements in common, but also a few basic differences, some at the level of principle and some with regard to strategy.

In common, the three approaches represent an explicit idealism and are built on specific ideas of how to improve society by helping children realize their full potential as intelligent, creative whole persons. Children are viewed as authors of their own learning and teachers work with them in carefully prepared, aesthetically pleasing environments. Partnering with parents is a strong theme in all three approaches. In addition, children are assessed by means other than traditional tests and grades in all three models.

*Waldorf* was founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), a “maverick” Austrian scientist and philosophical thinker. At the time, his ideas (coeducational, comprehensive from preschool through high school) were unconventional. Steiner theorized three cycles of seven-year stages of learning. Before age 7, imaginary play is the most important “work” of the child and the educational focus should be on bodily exploration, constructive and creative play and oral (never written) language, story and song. A significant portion of the school morning is devoted to interrupted imaginary play. The teacher plays a performance role as she leads or models activities. There are now more than 800 Waldorf schools in over 40 countries.

*Montessori* was founded by Maria Montessori (1870-1952), Italy’s first woman physician who started Casa dei Bambini in 1907 for children ages 4-7 in a Rome slum housing project. Montessori saw development as a series of six-year periods. In Montessori, children are grouped into multi-age classrooms spanning three years with (usually) more than one teacher. Children have freedom to choose activities and explore them without interruption in a carefully prepared, serene environment. The curriculum is highly individualized, resulting in some young children

mastering reading and writing before age six. Preschool children experience the Montessori curriculum in the morning and typical child-care play, including fantasy play, in the afternoon. The Montessori teacher plays the role of “unobtrusive director” in the classroom. More than 5,000 schools in the US call themselves “Montessori” and additional Montessori-like programs are in many elementary schools.

What is now called *Reggio Emilia* was the vision of founding director Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia after World War II. The system evolved from a parent cooperative movement into a city-run system that is family-centered and serves children at infant-toddler and preschool levels. It is not a formal model like Waldorf or Montessori, with defined methods, teacher certification and accreditation. Malaguzzi’s vision was that of “educational-based relationships,” which focus on each child in relation to others. Teachers follow the children’s interests and do not provide focused instruction in reading and writing. Teaching and learning are negotiated, emergent processes between adults and children. Close, multi-year adult-child and peer relationships are fostered. Teachers serve as resources and guides to the children. Classroom teachers work in pairs. Additional teachers specially trained in the visual arts encourage visual expression. Numerous institutes, websites and organizations have been founded worldwide to promulgate the Reggio Emilia style of preschool education.

The author concludes by pointing out that child outcome research, as it is known in the U.S., is not intrinsic to the way educators in other countries evaluate the three approaches. Instead, parents receive extensive descriptive information about their children’s daily life and progress, and share in culminating programs or performances. The Reggio Emilia strategy of documentation, for example, helps teachers listen to, see and guide the children with whom they work. The author notes, however, that as the three approaches increasingly interact with the world of public education – there is more emphasis being placed on conducting assessment and evaluation as it is practiced in public schools.