

## Young Students Construct

# Big Ideas

Embrace the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching.



ABOVE: Redwood Early Childhood, North Little Rock, Arkansas; OPPOSITE PAGE: Bridges Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.; Redwood Early Childhood artwork, North Little Rock, Arkansas



“Teachers listen for strong currents of interest within the flow of children’s ideas, as an organic way of co-deciding what activities will be created next,” explains Jody Veit-Edrington, principal of Redwood Early Childhood Center and Early Childhood Program Director for North Little Rock School District. She first heard about the Reggio Emilia philosophy 10 years ago. Fundamental to the approach is the belief that children are “powerful people, full of the desire and ability to construct their own knowledge,” she adds.

### Paradigm Shift in Pedagogy

When teachers commit to knowledge construction pedagogy, they experience a paradigm shift.

As North Little Rock early childhood teachers shifted their roles, they became co-learners—equally curious as the students. To scaffold the learning, they proposed projects that brought deep insights. Students

used art as a language to convey their deeper understanding. Sketchbooks and child-illustrated journals flourished, which served teachers’ needs for authentic assessment.

Traditionally, much of teachers’ prep time was spent planning. Now that work is done in partnership with children. More of their time is spent on reflection at the end of each day and documenting how classroom outcomes fit the standards and state framework.

“We have high-risk kids and need to document that every standard and skill in the state’s early childhood framework is being met,” Veit-Edrington says. “We aren’t ignoring any skills; [we’re] just aligning what we do to children’s interests instead of an externally prescribed scope and sequence.” And it works. According to Veit-Edrington, these students have significantly higher scores on general knowledge, oral communication, and math concepts than their peers who didn’t experience the Reggio approach.

- Incredibly fast-growing brain synapse connections that naturally start to prune after age 5. Early stimulation is critical to help the fertile young human brain reach its full potential.

There are huge untapped possibilities in the minds of preschoolers. Elementary principals are more readily embracing opportunities to influence these young, fertile minds and offering some of the most outstanding high-quality models—those in which children construct knowledge.

### The Reggio Emilia Approach

Knowledge is most easily constructed in a young mind that is predisposed to playfully explore, compare/contrast, role play, create, and draw—all part of the learning process that young children do naturally. The Reggio Emilia Approach is a knowledge construction philosophy based on observation and documentation—by both teachers and students—as children play. Founded by Loris Malaguzzi in the Reggio region of Italy, this approach affects the classroom environment, curriculum, and pedagogy.

sixth graders, think younger. They are either in your early childhood program or in your community, clamoring to get a jumpstart on school. Preschoolers have what it takes to be masters of knowledge construction:

Masters of knowledge construction are students who:

- Are most curious and most flexible—able to move fluidly between what is known and what can be imagined;
- Dare to articulate new ideas without fear of classmates’ snickers; and
- Fully immerse themselves in the role of problem-solver and can imagine original solutions.

Which of your students have the strongest knowledge construction capacity? If you answered fifth or

- Insatiable curiosity;
- A magical ability to move seamlessly between reality and fantasy;
- The “can-do” predisposition that knowledge construction requires, unhampered by peer pressure and societal norms that erode school-age children’s sense of can-do confidence; and

All knowledge is constructed, not memorized. Knowledge construction occurs when children are asked to generate new ideas and to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. Children develop these skills while engaged in the mental and physical art-creating processes. Artists, at any age, observe carefully and interpret what they are seeing. They synthesize ideas as they create, determining ways to express their thoughts and feelings for others to see. They analyze problems and generate ideas to solve them. The process of making art is one of constructing knowledge.

FROM	TO
Purveyor of content	Observer of children’s interests
Prescribing lessons	Listening for opportune teachable moments
Setting the agenda	Enriching the environment
Following scope and sequence	Embedding skills mastery and state early childhood framework into daily activities
Displaying cartoon posters	Helping children curate what is displayed

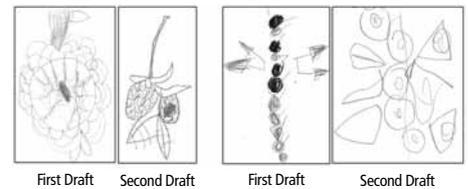


# Wonder. Curiosity. Capability.

“The pleasure of learning, of knowing, and of understanding is one of the most important and basic feelings that every child expects from the experiences he confronts alone, with other children, or with adults. It is a crucial feeling which must be reinforced so that the pleasure survives even when reality may prove that learning, knowing, and understanding involves difficulty and effort. It is in this very capacity for survival that pleasure is transformed into pure joy.”

—Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), Founder, Reggio Emilia Approach

LEFT: Redwood Early Childhood, Little Rock, Arkansas;  
RIGHT: Bridges Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.



First Draft Second Draft First Draft Second Draft

Because North Little Rock is an urban, high-poverty community, teachers had to adjust their curricula to better relate to students. “Too many of our early childhood lessons had no context to these kids’ lives—units on beach vacations and Christopher Columbus’ ships,” says Veit-Edrington. “Now they paint what they did on vacation, not out-of-reach ocean beaches. We visit the river nearby and look at the boats in our community. Children sketch these boats and understand them more deeply than they could ever grasp a 15th century ship.” Veit-Edrington’s advice to other schools is to:

- Draw inspiration from what children see in their world;
- Pick projects that spark long-term investigations; and
- Observe children to see where their curiosity takes them next.

### Protocols and Portfolios

Expeditionary learning—a series of drafting and critiquing protocols that builds a culture of feedback and editing—is another method that works well with our youngest learners. Principal Olivia Smith and art teacher Kristin

Nagy have been working with their pre-K-1 teachers and students on this approach at Bridges Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. Young students engage in the multiple-stage process of artistic sketching, critiquing, reflecting, and editing.

Their feedback to one another transforms their thinking and the next draft. For example, kindergarteners’ study of fruits and trees grew from the students’ interest in the plants with which they were familiar. The 5-year-old’s work above was based on this practice of soliciting feedback—how could she draw this differently? From a close-up on one berry, she next used lines and shapes to show the delicate balance of berries on a shared stem.

Each child develops a personal portfolio that documents increased observation skills. Nagy found that young children have an incredible capacity to focus and share feedback with one another when they create art based on their observations.

### Power of Play

The 2009 report *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* calls for “early education that empha-

sizes experiential, hands-on activities, open-ended creative play, and caring human relationships.” The report was published by the Alliance for Childhood, whose board members are education scholars, including Linda Darling-Hammond, David Elkind, Sam Meisels, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. Their analysis of studies shows the best early childhood pedagogy—child-initiated play—has fallen out of favor. Replaced by weaker practices that range from teacher-driven “scripted didactic” to teacher passive “laissez-faire/anything goes,” too many early childhood programs lack the high-quality that reaps intended outcomes.

“Preschool education must not follow the same path that has led kindergartens toward intense academic instruction with little or no time for child-initiated learning,” the report states. “Creative play that children can control is central to their physical, emotional and cognitive growth.”

*Crisis in the Kindergarten* reminds readers of a paramount truth: Education is not a race where the first to finish wins. Rather, education is a lifelong endeavor, and the seeds are best planted in the fertile minds of preschoolers. ■