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ADAPTING THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH IN SINGAPORE: ADDRESSING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING NEEDS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

With the ongoing reform of early childhood education in Singapore, the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) has attracted more attention in the field. This qualitative study explores the practical challenges and professional development needs of preschool teachers in Singapore in implementing the REA. Despite the increasing popularity of the REA, which emphasizes child-centered pedagogy. Research findings from semi-structured interviews with three preschool teachers indicate that teachers face barriers. Challenges include inadequate resources, insufficient training, and cultural

differences between the REA philosophy and the prevailing parental expectations of education (focus on academic achievement). This study highlights the need for professional development that not only deepen teachers' understanding of REA, but also equip them with practical skills to adapt to the cultural expectations of Singaporean education. This study contributes to the discourse on adapting Western educational models in Asian settings and emphasizes the importance of aligning educational innovations with local cultural and educational norms.

Keywords:

Reggio Emilia Approach, Professional Development, Preschool Education, Singapore, Cultural Adaptation

1. Introduction

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has been committed to continuous reform of its education system, aiming to maintain its global economic competitiveness by enhancing the quality of education (Gopinathan, 2007). Particularly since 2000, under the guidance of *the Steering Committee for Preschool Education (SCPE)*, *the Ministry of Education (MOE)* has implemented adjustments to preschool education policies, shifting from a traditional academic focus towards holistic development (Wong, 2000, p6). This shift emphasizes providing children with opportunities for inquiry and exploration and fostering the development of social and emotional skills through play-based curricula (MOE 2012; Tan 2017).

This shift in educational policy has provided fertile ground for the introduction of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) in Singapore. Originating in Italy in 1945 (Cagliari et al. 2016), REA emphasizes child-centered learning (Izuagba et al. 2017) and underscores the importance of integrating the combined efforts of families, teachers, and the community to create enriching learning environments for children (Baldacchino 2011). Although REA is internationally recognized for its innovative educational philosophy, implementing Western curricular approaches and pedagogical practices faces numerous challenges in East and Southeast Asian countries and regions such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan. This is due to the distinct traditions and contexts of Eastern and Western cultures, as well as divergent underlying educational ideologies and cultural norms (Hsieh 2004; Lee and Tseng 2008; Li, Wang, and Wong 2011).

This study aims to explore the professional development and training challenges faced by preschool teachers in Singapore when implementing REA, with a particular focus on how to adjust and adapt to the needs of the local educational environment. By analyzing teachers' experiences and needs in detail, the study seeks to provide strategies and recommendations for implementing REA in Singapore and other culturally similar regions, to promote better professional growth and teaching practices for educators.

2. Literature Review

The Reggio Emilia Approach should be seen as a philosophy (Fernández Santín & Feliu Torruella 2017), in which everyone close to the child should be involved in the child's process of

discovering and exploring the world (Malaguzzi 1993; Scott 2023). Research on the promotion of the REA outside of Italy has attracted significant attention from early childhood researchers (Alsedrani 2020; Arseven 2014; Landi, et al. 2022; Melhuish et al. 2015; New 2000; Wood, T & Parnell 2015). Although REA has been recognized and promoted internationally, its application in different cultural and educational systems still faces challenges (Alsedrani 2020). The REA is also cannot be fully replicated in other environments (Rivkin, 2014). Hewett (2001) noted that "it is neither a set of guidelines nor a prescriptive recipe. It can only be effectively practiced if carefully explored and redefined according to the local culture" (Hewett 2001 p.99, Kim & Darling 2009), especially in Asian countries with different traditions, underlying educational ideologies and cultural norms (Hsieh 2004; Lee and Tseng 2008; Li et al. 2011).

As practitioners of education, preschool teachers need to deeply understand the philosophy and principles of REA, which usually requires ongoing and systematic professional training (Alsedrani 2020; Smith 2021). Teachers are often limited in accessing training due to educational system and resource allocation (Alam & Mohanty 2023). Therefore, this study takes Singapore as a starting point to explore the views and practical needs of early childhood teachers. This not only helps teachers better understand and implement REA, but also promotes its sustainable development within the local educational environment.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative research emphasizes observing and interpreting people's behaviors and experiences in their natural environment (Baldacchino 2011). Data was collected through interviews, which aim to understand people's knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, all of which are closely related to understanding a specific social reality (Hussein 2022). The focus of this study is to explore the professional development and training challenges faced by preschool teachers in Singapore when implementing the REA. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What are the main obstacles teachers face in the process of implementing the Reggio Emilia Approach?
2. Does the existing teacher training meet the needs of teachers in implementing this approach?

3.2 Data Collection Strategy

This study through semi-structured interviews collect data. The interview guide is based on a review of existing literature, such as the studies by Cagliari et al. (2016) and Gantt (2021), which informed the development of targeted interview questions to gain in-depth insights into teachers' practical needs and specific challenges in the implementation process.

The participants in this study were teachers working in kindergartens in Singapore where REA was implemented. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a representation of teachers. Totally three preschool teachers were selected. All participants are female, with years of experience ranging from 6 to over 10 years. Their exposure to the Reggio Emilia Approach spans between 1 and 4 years.

All participants were be asked the same core questions to ensure the consistency and comparability of the data. The interviews between 20 to 40 minutes respectively, all interviews were conducted by same researcher.

This study strictly adheres to academic ethical guidelines, ensuring the respect and protection of participants' rights. Before the interviews, participants will be informed that the conversation will be recorded, and they will be provided with information about the purpose, process, and data collection methods of the study, and signing of an informed consent form. All interview data will be used solely by the researcher, and participants' identities will be kept confidential, with the data anonymized. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the study commenced.

3.3 Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to analyze data from three participants. Initially, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and NVivo 14 software was utilized for coding. The unit of analysis was the sentence or paragraph. Guided by the research objectives, the coding process was conducted in two phases: open coding and axial coding. Open coding aimed to identify initial themes emerging from the data, while axial coding involved categorizing and refining these themes.

4. Results

This study employed semi-structured interviews to collect Singaporean preschool teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of the REA. The research findings are presented in two sections. The first section presents the challenges encountered by teachers during the

implementation process. The second section explores the way of preschool teachers' professional development on REA.

4.1 Challenges in Implementing the REA

Preschool teachers display a positive attitude toward the REA. Most of the interviewed teachers stated that the philosophy of the REA, such as emphasizing children's autonomous exploration, collaborating with children, respecting children and so on, has influenced their teaching practices. Although the participants expressed enthusiasm for implementing REA, they also pointed out many obstacles.

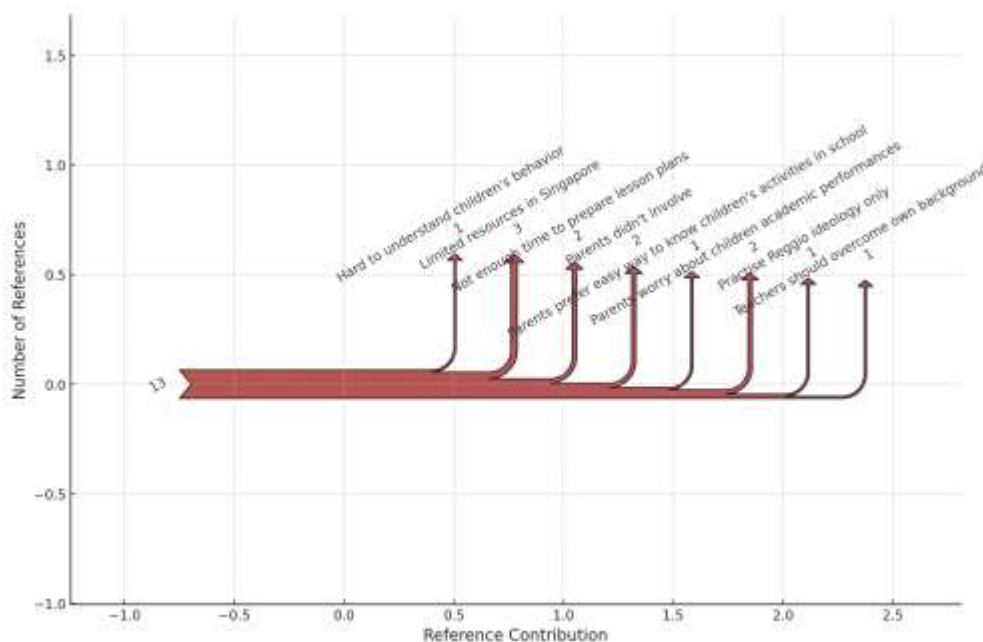


Figure 1: *Challenges faced by teachers*

The main difficulties encountered by teachers in implementing REA including time commitment; parental perceptions of education; and resource constraints. Due to knowledge constraints, it is difficult to teach exactly what is required In the REA. At the same time, time pressure is also a major problem. Several teachers said that they did not have enough time to do preparation before class and study the REA in depth.

Participant 3 noted that lesson planning required sacrificing personal time, including vacation and off work time.

When they did have the energy to do so, it was difficult to find relevant platforms and resources. Compared to traditional teaching methods, so teachers need to spend more time, energy and even extra money to prepare for teaching.

There is still a lack of resources for training and learning about the Reggio curriculum in Singapore (Participant 3)

Accessing Reggio's resources is much more difficult compared to other programs. (Participant 2)

In addition, the parental factor should not be overlooked. Some parents prefer simple pictures or other ways of understanding their child's development and find the "documents and files" that the REA promotes to be too cumbersome. Due to Singapore's education system and social context, parents emphasize on the academic ability of their children in the early years. Concerns about their children's academic abilities also influence their understanding and support of the school's implementation of the REA.

Participant 1 expressed parents' concern that their children were not practicing skills such as writing, Chinese pinyin, and English pronunciation, and were not receiving a structured academic education.

4.2 Teacher training and learning of the REA



Figure 2: *Teachers' Access to REA*

The main avenue for Singapore kindergarten teachers to receive REA-related training is through internal training. Teachers' pre-service training was provided by the principal, who would fly to Italy from time to time to study and bring new experiences to provide ongoing training for teacher development.

The principal would provide training for new teachers (Participant 2).

The kindergarten would hold regular training days, which were usually conducted by the kindergarten and organized by the principal (Participant 3).

In addition, some teachers look for resources through social media platforms and books, which provides flexibility for self-study, but teachers reported a lack of practical guidance and peer exchange opportunities. Some teachers reported that the kindergarten invites experts from the Reggio program, so she could gain experience from trainers from Italy. However, the opportunities is very rare.

Participant 3 stated:” the kindergarten will help me to travel to Italy at the end of the year”.

5. Discussion

In Singapore's educational environment, teachers not only have to cope with limitations in teaching resources and time, but also face parents' high expectations for traditional academic achievements (Cagliari et al. 2016; Gantt 2021). These findings resonate with and differ from the challenges encountered by other countries when implementing the REA.

Globally, literature from countries such as Italy and the United States often mentions issues related to resource allocation and the professional development needs of educators when implementing REA (Edwards & Gandini 2018; Kang 2007). This aligns with the challenges reflected by teachers in this study, emphasizing that the core needs for educational resources and training are universally present across different countries and educational systems (Wood et al. 2015). However, the unique challenge faced by Singaporean teachers lies in balancing the REA educational philosophy with parents' expectations for traditional academic outcomes, a concern less commonly mentioned in other literature. Cultural adaptability is a critical factor to consider when implementing any educational philosophy (Maria & Sanly 2005; New 2000; Zhao et al. 2003). As Gandini (2018) noted, the adaptability of REA in non-Italian cultures is especially pronounced due to the widespread differences in educational values and social expectations globally. This study highlights the implementation challenges within Singapore's specific socio-cultural context, providing an example that illustrates the complexity of promoting Western educational innovations in East Asian educational systems.

While there are some limitations. First, the study sample is relatively small and may not fully represent the experiences of all preschool teachers in Singapore. Second, data collection primarily relies on teachers' self-reports, which may be subject to subjectivity. Future research could improve the generalizability of the results by expanding the sample size and using a mixed-methods design.

6. Conclusion

Based on the challenges mentioned above, a comprehensive, enriched, and systematic teacher training and guidance should be built up. Although schools receive direct guidance from Italian experts, the intervals between sessions are too long to meet the teachers' practical needs. Specialized training could help them deepen their understanding and flexibly apply the ideas and practices of the REA (Wood et al. 2015). Besides, given the limitations in resources and time pressure, teachers are calling for more resource support from schools and society, including teaching materials, funding, and reasonable teaching schedules, to reduce their burden and enhance the quality of teaching. At the same time, strengthening the home-school collaboration is also crucial. Although the REA encourages collaboration with families and communities, the study's findings indicate that Singaporean parents' expectations for traditional academic success restrict teachers' full implementation of REA. This cultural mismatch highlights the necessity of strengthening parent education and involving them in the philosophical foundations of the Reggio Emilia Approach, to ensure a favorable environment for holistic education. Lastly, regarding personal development, teachers expressed a desire for continuous learning and professional growth, hoping to improve their teaching abilities and deepen their understanding of the Reggio Emilia Approach through ongoing learning and reflection. Clearly, education policymakers and school leaders in Singapore need to consider these factors and, while respecting local educational values and expectations, improve professional development and resource allocation to better apply REA as an early childhood education innovation.

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