

Tiziana Filippini volunteered at and visited with a number of schools during her visit to South Africa in August and September 2017. What follows below is a selection of conversational insights shared during her visit, consolidated by AREA and checked by Tiziana for accuracy and consistency.

To find out more about Tiziana's time in SA – what inspired her visit and who she saw – [read our short report](#).



INSIGHTS

Words of wisdom from Tiziana

> Keep your context and community in mind

The Reggio Approach is not a recipe, it doesn't tell you what to do. Rather, it's an educational approach rooted in Reggio Emilia, one that asks you to be respectful and mindful of your context and community – to be aware of questions like where your children come from, where they live, what their days are like, what they miss or want, so as to be able to welcome the children and their culture. To think that it is a model to implement (that is, to do it in any other way) is to betray the approach.

> Pay attention to the process

When we work with very young children we may find it very difficult if we don't change the lens we use to look at them - it is not easy to understand what they are learning, what is going on. Malaguzzi used to say that if you can't read the many things they're expressing, how they're seeking to come into relationship with you and the world, to dialogue and communicate, you're not paying enough attention, you're not listening enough. Everything they do is full of meaning. If you can't read what they are doing, you have to learn to. I came to realise that, at this early age, you need to start with who the children in front of you are, and seek new perspectives and lenses on them. What is readable in these early years should not just be the result or a product, but the process by which they did it. They tell you a story with their body, their voice, their movements while they are drawing that is much more meaningful than what you can understand from looking at their final drawing. The car they're drawing might not be visible in the picture, but as they draw, you can hear the car, see its movements, its progress on the page. We are taught as teachers that the children have to come up with a product – that *that's* learning. But at this age, it's not often that they create something that is recognisable in a figurative way. But in their body, their sounds,

their movements, the nature of the marks they put on a page – light or strong, small or on the whole page – they're communicating an image, an experience. They're telling a story. Think about an infant discovering themselves in the mirror, learning to recognise their own reflection – what is their approach, their process to get to grasp with their physical identity. Take advantage of these everyday treasures – this too is learning. Provide an environment to make relationships, to recognise patterns, to experience colour, light, sound, movement, texture, taste. It can be tough for us as adults to reconnect to infants' preverbal state – but that's where the 100 languages come in.

> Visit other classrooms

Classroom environments can tell you a lot about a teacher, about what she thinks of her role and of her children. Visit the classrooms of your colleagues and look closely: what do you like, how do you feel, what's different, what's the same compared with yours, what can you learn, what can you borrow or build on? How does the documentation on the walls and the organisation of the environment speak to you, and what does it say? What a teacher puts in a space and on the walls is what she believes is important. It's not about fancy equipment but about how the vision and values are displayed and reflected, how things are organised and why. The goal of this exercise is not to create carbon copies of each other's classrooms, but to learn and grow from each other's experiences and practice. We can see it as a form of professional development that can help us avoid overconfidence in our classroom, help us process and question, and may also help us move towards new ways of doing things. As teachers we should continually increase our capacity, our competencies. As we visit our colleagues' classrooms, we develop a heightened awareness of our own practice, and learn to become more reflective. By looking at others, you learn to watch yourself, what you do and how you think, more carefully.

“Learning is not a sum – adding, adding, adding. Sometimes I need to be exposed to things that help me reorganise my knowledge, that challenge and shape how I think.”

> Learn how to learn

We often use time to keep ourselves 'safe'. We're so focused on quantity of learning that we forget about quality. We cover content you can find on the internet in seconds. What is the role of a school in today's context? Given the vast quantities of information out there, it's important to allow children to develop their own ways of learning and thinking, as this will provide the scaffold and structure on which they can build and make sense of the wealth of information available. Children are in the process of building and capturing a body of knowledge. And learning is not a sum – adding, adding, adding. Sometimes I need to be exposed to things that help me reorganise my knowledge, that challenge and shape how I think. Real learning is not a once-off performance – it's when you can use the tools and competency you have

acquired, regardless of context. In order to learn we need time for repetition, time in which we're allowed to get acquainted, to get more points of view. When we revisit a topic through different languages, it's not a replay – but a way to build a more rich understanding by augmenting, reorganising. This is not just a question of curriculum, programme or technical choice – it's an ethical vision that embraces the different way through which each one of us learns. Each one of us knows how hard it is to process all the information we are exposed to every day, or how hard it can be to reflect and change, to become more the way we want to be. It's critically important for all of us to learn how to learn, to learn flexible ways of looking, thinking and making meaning.

> Look beyond 'bad' behaviour

What's critical to understand is that there's always a reason why a child is behaving in a certain way – even if it's in ways we may think of as 'nasty' or 'naughty'. Maybe they feel too challenged to do the task asked of them, and, to them, it's better to be nasty than to fail. If a child is not responding positively to what you're doing in class, try building on an activity they are interested in or activities to which they're more naturally drawn – like running, jumping, something in which they can physically express themselves. And then build out from there: How fast and far did they run? How high did they jump? Who can jump higher, and how can we measure? Can they draw someone who is running? Find something they feel passionately about, in which they are happy to engage, and work from there. There are many strategies, many ways in which children learn – ways that are more intriguing, that can motivate the children more. I have to recognise the particular children I am in dialogue with – not just a standard idea of children, but these children that are in my classroom. Also pay attention to the fact that they may behave 'badly' because they are bored, in which case we have to revisit the educational context we offer them!

> Find the right question *and* the right moment

The words we use are often very important. We should reflect on what questions we ask and when we ask them. It's not just about finding a good question, it's about finding the right moment to ask it. When you ask children something they're interested in, they will have a lot to say. Our goal is to link what they're interested into the main goals of the curriculum. Our role is to get children to reorganise, to elaborate what they've been doing. An alive question takes its life from what the children are saying or working on and asks them to build on it. Your question should help the child evolve toward the main goal you want them to achieve. Questions are not necessarily just verbal – we also pose questions to children through the contexts we design and offer.

> Enquire from reality, investigate from life

In Reggio Emilia, children are never asked to simply copy a model, picture or an object. Rather, we ask them to enquire from reality, to look and observe the world carefully. Drawing is a way to get into relationship, to get into dialogue with the world. Part of the way that we 'teach' children is to encourage them not to lean on stereotypes, but to actually see the world. For example, when we ask a small group of children if they want to draw an object that is in front of them in the middle of the table – a common object they're familiar with, like a coffee pot, a toy horse, a yellow daisy – we don't expect them to copy it. When we invite the children to have a look at their drawings and compare them, they find out how each picture is drawn not just by a different person, but also from a different point of view. Meanwhile, all of this asks them to concentrate, to observe what is in front of them, to reflect on what they observe – taking them closer to the expectations of primary school.

> Remember: Play is work

From a conversation in a classroom where a group of children were playing with papers/shapes

When children are playing with loose parts, you might come by and ask them to create shapes with these elements. Or you might ask them to count the parts, to make numerals with them, to only use a certain number of objects per pattern. Sometimes you can share these aims before the children start to play so as to help them focus on something. Give them time to experiment, and then after a time in which they seem to have no more to find out, ask them to show you what they've learnt and discovered. Document what they show you and what they say – as they learn, this becomes your proof of fulfilling the curriculum. This offers them the opportunity to get a more formal understanding of what their time of play is about. As an example, there's an old Italian game like Snakes and Ladders, but set in a spiral, called the Game of the Goose. Children can play with one of two dice – one showing numbers as symbols, the other showing number quantities – and have to move as many places as the dice shows, until they reach the end. This simple game helps them learn that numbers are made up of both quantity and order, and builds up an internal resonance of what numbers are about – instead of counting just being a form of rote memorisation, a song parroted back to you. They learn by moving from the concrete to the abstract..

> Prioritise the goals of the curriculum

Many teachers have asked me about how to practise the Reggio philosophy while working within the constraints of a curriculum. I think that, first of all, we have to understand what a curriculum is and how we interpret it. The curriculum is a metacognitive structure that allows us to orient and organise the processes of teaching and learning. We need to move beyond the feeling of "I hate the curriculum". We shouldn't mistake the programme and didactic activity cards with the goals of the curriculum. The programme or content itself is not the goal, it's a

tool to reach the goal – *one of the possible ways!* There are many methodologies, many ways to reach the goal, and, as Malaguzzi used to say, we should find these with the children. For example, if the goal is that the children must be able to write a simple sentence, we can, on one hand, simply decide the sentence for them and make them memorise each letter and word and the order so as to get to a performance. Alternatively, we can start from the children themselves, ask them what words they can already write and read – and build the sentence from there. When we have identified what the goal and the competency behind it is, what the children have to achieve, we are more free to design an educational context that better fits our children – and still be sure we are following the curriculum. In order to get started and not feel uncomfortable, our colleagues can be an important resource in this process. Together, we can sit and look at what's prescribed for the day or the week, and brainstorm ways to help children get to grips with the main goals of the curriculum. And in this way as a teacher I find my role, my way to give meaning to my responsibility – not waste my intelligence. I'm not just reproducing the 'curriculum', repeating the same activities each year, not interacting with the children I work with and their diversity. I'm using my brain to think, to find new solutions, to innovate. And I'm probably getting more engaged and passionate...

> Meet parents where they're at

It's important to offer parents and guardians multiple moments and opportunities to be involved – to welcome their willingness and their differences. We should see infant-toddler centres, preschools, schools as learning places for the adults too. We learn to be teachers, parents learn to become better parents. For some it is easier to be part of or take part in the life of the school by helping with outings, for others it is easier to come for meetings, still others are prepared to work in the school and get the environment more amiable... Even in Reggio, it's not easy to get all our parents and guardians to attend meetings – parties are far more popular. Work with each of your parents where they're at, the same as you would do for their children. Many things can be done with the help of parents, but you have to draw this potential out of them by preparing opportunities to meet, to foster information, dialogue, confrontation, offerings that value the knowledge and skills of everyone, and promote the shared construction of meaning.

> Collaborate with your colleagues

Collaboration and working together has to become a habit among teachers. It doesn't develop overnight, but its role is invaluable – especially in this systemic approach, where you can't change one part alone, the changes have to take place over the entire system. One teacher working alone can only do so much; with a committed team of colleagues and time spent sharing and working together, so much more becomes possible. As an individual we bring our subjectivity, our own point of view, very partial, sometimes stereotyped. It's through coming into conversation and dialogue that we open up possibilities for ourselves and each other.

Collaboration opens you out to different perspectives and new ways of thinking and seeing – a gift we receive through honest feedback. A team of teachers can also support and encourage each other – helping create a shared sense of purpose and belonging. And like with children, learning how to collaborate takes time. The occasion to meet should be part of the school life – an organisation that supports collegiality is needed so we can build relationships while we learn how to be confident in what we think and do ... reflecting on our experience. Learning is not linear, but is a process of revisiting what we have done, what we know, so to be able to rearrange, reorganise, question, challenge, unlearn, relearn. It's more of a cyclical or spiral process than a linear one. So too with collaboration.

“As an individual we bring our subjectivity, our own point of view, very partial, sometimes stereotyped. It's through coming into conversation and dialogue that we open up possibilities for ourselves and each other.”

> Make mistakes

Error is an amazing occasion to learn – for the teacher, for the child, for any adult. It's an opportunity to enquire what's working and what's not, backed up by evidence.

> Make learning visible

We first started documenting as a means of giving visibility to children and their potential. Atelieristas helped us make what was happening or going on in the school visible to parents and the city (and still do so). This was in order to share our approach and provoke a wider debate around children and early childhood education. We started taking notes, sometimes recording, taking photos and researching how to communicate or display what we were doing, ensuring the walls of the school spoke to children, teachers and parents. In this way, documentation became part of the identity of the school – communicating values, providing ideas about what the space is for, what experiences are carried out in the school. Our research was fueled by different forms and times of documentation and observation that have been enriched with tools and various meanings over time. We introduced a daily or monthly visual agenda – a brief record, some pictures, some notes, traces and drafts of the main ongoing project. Normally this agenda unpacks the premises of what we're doing and why we're doing it, and includes elements to help us think and reflect. We have always recognised that documentation has an important function in leaving traces and witnessing educational activities, creating and conserving memories that give value and visibility to children and their products, and communicate key information to families about their children's school experiences. But it is in shifting attention from what has been done to how we proceed from the product to the process that we find its deepest value, its most important function.

Documentation is not just a post-reconstruction of the path, but a collateral and contemporary process, not simply reorganising and arranging the materials for a linear description of the stages crossed along the path, but a narrative and arguing track that seeks to give meaning to events and processes, to interpret possible events in the itinerary.

> Don't design an activity without documentation

Documentation captures traces of the past that then inform our path into the future. It is an act of visibility and communication that informs *progettazione* – our strategy to design activities and formulate proposals. Normally we don't design an activity without revisiting and interpreting the learning traces! When we begin to design, we try not to think about the activities we can do – with that line of thinking, you enter and develop a programme, a sequence of activities to follow. Rather, at this first moment, we're just exploring the potentialities of the topic we want to work on with the children and see what the children can achieve in encountering and exploring it (knowing too you cannot stretch the topic where it does not go). We build hypotheses or prefigurations – oriented by the value, the aim or the concept behind the topic – and the more we manage to produce project choices (hypotheses, intents), the more the documentation becomes sustainable with less time and resource dispersion. We orient ourselves according to our values, a big goal, a philosophical question – and this is what guides us through the project, which in itself doesn't have an order or a sequence, but uses strategic thinking, a thought that is able to restructure on the basis of what is happening. There is close interdependence between designing experiences with children and designing documentation. And in this way, documentation and *progettazione* are intimately interwoven and co-emerging. All the observation and traces of what the children do is collected in a folder or file. These materials are often shared with the children – as a way of displaying different perspectives and points of view, of bringing them into relationship with each other, of building up a shared memory and sense of an experience.

> Reflect and evaluate

We often ask children to self-reflect, to step back and think about what they've made or learnt. They often do so with close friends, evaluating together if what they've made represents their thinking or what they want to communicate effectively. This process helps them learn to cope with reflection and criticism – critical skills in the world. Sharing, reflecting and evaluating in small groups also gives each child more time to elaborate on what they've learnt (as opposed to doing so with the whole class, which takes a great deal of time). For teachers to reflect on and evaluate their practice is an important occasion for professional learning. Documentation is part of a permanent process of evaluation, offering materials to share with colleagues and parents for professional development purposes, enabling reflection, raising awareness, enhancing action in schools on a daily basis.

> Celebrate difference

It's vital to see children as people, not just as human beings who lack something. It is even more important to recognise the uniqueness of each child, to welcome their differences. To have just one pre-defined model for who or what a person is, means to narrow down the diversity and possibility on this planet. Each of us has 100 ways to relate to the world around us, to express ourselves, to welcome and allow the differences among us. When we speak of children and adults having 100 languages, we express an ethical point of view, not just an artistic one.

“Each of us has 100 ways to relate to the world around us, to express ourselves, to welcome and allow the differences among us. When we speak of children and adults having 100 languages, we express an ethical point of view, not just an artistic one.”

ANSWERS

Tiziana's responses to some of your frequently asked questions

What's the Reggio approach to teaching children to read and write?

It's helpful for children to grow in confidence in making sense of the written code. They start to be curious about it very early, paying attention to the alphabetical code they find in real life, in books. We think that learning to write and to read is not only about learning a technique, it's more about discovering the rules of how the code works. Children develop their own theories and start to differentiate writing their name from drawing; they make signs, pretending to write letters and words, and it is from the confrontation with other children and teachers that their theories tend to evolve and go to the conventionality of writing. We try to organise learning contexts in which children can discover the rules of the written code - by letting them exchange messages with a friend, for example, and find out what doesn't work, until they learn the value of codifying language in order to communicate with others.

What readings would you recommend for teachers new to Reggio?

I'd recommend the last book of Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*. That and the catalogue of *100 Languages* exhibition, which has introductions to each topic by both pedagogistas and professionals from different disciplines.

What qualities are you looking for when you hire a new teacher, pedagogista or atelierista?

Given that we're funded by government, we have to hold a public competition for permanent positions, which has two components: a written essay and an interview. In our system, you must have a degree to apply and if you have previous experience you get extra points. More than what you know, however, it's about who you are. Those of us interviewing potential candidates ask ourselves: Is this person able to think on their own, to be flexible, to be curious? What is their point of view, what are their interests? We're looking for something to help us understand the applicant's mindset. Is this teacher interested in what happens in the world around them? What is their idea of childhood – not just what they've memorised or have been told, but their personal re-elaboration. They don't have to agree with everything the Reggio approach believes, but they should be engaging and wrestling with ideas on a personal basis, instead of waiting for someone else to tell them what to do or what to think. As you're going through your own hiring process, ask yourself: what and how and who should a teacher be? What role should a teacher play? Your vision, your responses, gives you a lens to sift through the information you get during the application and interview process.

Can the Reggio approach guarantee that it's capable of meeting every child where they are?

When we talk about education taking place in a school, in a community, no philosophy can 100% guarantee that it's personalised to each and every child. That's partly why, in Reggio, we refer to the 100 languages theory to welcome differences and try to make many, many possibilities available in daily life contexts. It's also why we emphasise work in small groups. We believe that working in small groups may more easily allow children to choose according to their interests, their timing. Learning is not a singular process. We strongly believe that learning takes place in interactions, in relationship, so we really believe we should offer contexts that foster good relationships among our children.

I'm new to Reggio, but I'm inspired. Where do I start?

Look to your children. Observe them closely and learn more about their processes and strategies for exploring the world and coming into relationship. Equipped with this information, start by 'reading' the tasks set for your children and your class differently, brainstorming different activities and proposals for reaching the goal set by your legislation, tailored to the children you know. Don't just replicate the way you were taught. See that the goal you're meant to reach has many different entry points, which you can access through 100 languages. Ask yourself: How can I use these different languages to once again observe and learn from my children. Get beyond the

idea that children must end each day with a final product. A product doesn't mean learning. Process is the learning. Over time you will learn to move in more flexible and fluid ways, to look at things and see the opportunity they offer. Be confident. Draw on and build support in the community in which you operate. As a new teacher, it also helps to see documentation, examples of learning made visible. If you have colleagues, draw on their insights and experience – it's important, in your journey as a teacher and with Reggio, that you're not on your own. Colleagues are critical friends for exchanging and comparing ideas, provoking thinking – so you don't just confirm your existing point of view. Visit other classrooms – of your colleagues, and at other schools. Look again at your own classroom and ask yourself how and if it expresses the belief that children are different and unique. Without realising it, you may find you're expressing the opposite.

Any insights or comments from your visit to Johannesburg?

While travelling around the city, I was struck by the lack of children. In Reggio, we believe that if a city is friendly for children, it's friendly for everyone. Where are your children?

