



Playing to Learn

Reggio Emilia is a town in Italy. It is where, after World War II, a new philosophy for teaching early learners was born. The philosophy, known as the Reggio Emilia Approach, sees teachers working as facilitators and collaborators rather than instructors. It sees both students and parents having a say in what is to be learnt. It sees the classroom transformed, depending on topics and the curriculum.

Ilim College of Australia Inc is an Islamic school in Melbourne's northern suburbs. It is, where, in Terms 3 and 4 of 2012, the Reggio Emilia Approach was trialled with four Prep classes.

When learning about the topic of survival in Term 3, the students' classrooms were transformed, for a whole term, into make-believe wildernesses, with tents and tepees and bushes (the make-believe river was outside). As the students explored the 'wilderness', they developed their social skills, oral language and ability to document their learning – through writing, drawing or talking.

When the students were learning about the topic of movement in Term 4, their classrooms had all sorts of objects that move: rollerskates, skateboards, yoyos, things that fly and things that float. The students would play with these objects and learn how they worked.

'The students get very excited about the topics,' said Ilim College's Early Years Coordinator Sibel Balci. 'They find their classrooms are much more meaningful and are happily engulfed by what they are learning. They may think they are just playing but they are also learning.'

Ms Balci and her colleagues have been very much guided by Helen Schiele and Lili-Ann Kriegler of Independent Schools Victoria. Ms Schiele and Ms Kriegler drew on their own experiences of teaching via the Reggio Emilia Approach, as they provided Ilim College with support, professional learning and contacts.

'Play can allow for explicit teaching of skills and understandings in literacy and numeracy,' said Ms Schiele, an Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor. 'Play-based investigations within teaching and learning can be the basis of formal instruction. It can allow for creativity and imagination.'

Ilim College of Australia Inc is a Prep to Year 12 Islamic school in Broadmeadows with 1100 students.

Challenge: Address learning and social skills of Prep students.

Action: Create a curriculum based on the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Results: Students are more stimulated, more involved in their learning.

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– Ms Sibel Balci, Early Years Coordinator



Ms Balci stressed that the Reggio Emilia Approach still very much adheres to the requirements of the Australian Curriculum, including, of course, the students learning numeracy, literacy, social and other skills. 'It does not compromise our standards.'

Ms Balci noted that the Reggio Emilia Approach at Ilim College has come about due to the enthusiasm and hard work of the school's four Prep teachers, and the support of the school's leaders.

Keen to explore options for their own school, the teachers attended professional learning at Independent Schools Victoria and visited two schools that have embraced the Reggio Emilia Approach: the early learning centre of Fintona Girls' School (Independent), and Mill Park Primary School (government).

'We knew we didn't always have the answers,' said Ms Balci. 'We knew we were stepping into unfamiliar territory, so it was good to see how other schools are faring. These schools had the atmosphere, the true essence of the Reggio Emilia Approach. You could see the students were fully involved in their learning.'

Ms Balci said that Independent Schools Victoria had been instrumental in taking Ilim College on its learning journey. 'Helen Schiele and Lili-Ann Kriegler were fantastic with their assistance in networking, in planning and in providing literature. Their reassurance gave us the confidence to mould a curriculum that suited our students.'

Ms Schiele described Ms Balci and her Prep colleagues as 'a dynamic team which has been encouraged by their community, but more importantly by their leadership team, to adapt its teaching practices so they are able to better support their students' learning needs.

'The journey undertaken thus far speaks volumes of the professionalism, trust and level of collaboration at Ilim College. It has been a privilege to be part of that journey.'

The seeds of Ilim College's interest in the Reggio Emilia Approach were sown five years ago, when Prep classes began a developmental play curriculum, in which boxes of dress-ups or boxes of blocks kept in a classroom corner were used to stimulate the students' learning. But eventually, the school believed that a total transformation of the classroom – and, in turn, approaches to teaching – was required.

After trialling the Reggio Emilia Approach with four Prep classes in the latter half of 2012, Ilim College of Australia Inc is preparing to introduce it to Year 1 students in 2013 and Year 2 students in 2014.

This coincides with the school moving to a new campus in Glenroy in 2013. 'The new campus will really complement our new early years curriculum,' said Ms Balci. 'With open plan classrooms – and the Reggio Emilia Approach – there are endless possibilities.'

