



**Child-centred pedagogy in early childhood
education: The Montessori and Reggio
Emilia approaches | Dr Mary Hughes, 2021**

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1. Acknowledgments

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- Reggio Australia Information Exchange (RAIE)

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2. Executive Summary

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Italy is a country where design, creativity and imagination abound and in the field of early childhood education the Italians are world leaders. This relatively small country produced two of the twentieth century's most influential and innovative thinkers in early childhood education, Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994). The aim of this Fellowship was to investigate two educational approaches designed by these visionaries: The Montessori approach and the Reggio Emilia approach, with a view to strengthening and contextualising course content in an early childhood Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program in Victoria, Australia. Both approaches are child-centred and are based on a constructivist philosophy where the emphasis is on active learning. The Montessori approach was created by Maria Montessori who worked to develop the whole child, regardless of social status, income, nationality, homelife or ability. Similarly, the Reggio Emilia approach, created by Loris Malaguzzi, views the child as an active participant in their development and the role of the teacher is to guide them in their learning journey. Although both approaches can be applied to early childhood, primary school, and in the case of Montessori, to the secondary school context, for the purposes of this investigation the focus was on early childhood from birth to six years of age.

It has long been acknowledged that the early years of a child's life are the most important, setting the scene for all future learning success and social participation. Brain development is rapid in the early years, and early childhood education helps children develop high level cognitive, social and emotional skills. The importance of play cannot be overestimated, and both the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches value play with purpose, supported by adults, to develop children's understanding of the world around them.

The structure of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia is complex. All three tiers of government (federal, state/territory and local) play a role in the provision of ECEC, with The National Law setting a standard for ECEC across Australia. Early learning and care take place in a variety of settings including community-based, not-for-profit, school-based, for-profit centres and family or home care settings. Currently, the ECEC sector in Australia is facing major challenges, with serious workforce shortages and the inability of many families to access early learning and care for their children. The Australian government and all states and territories have committed to a four-year national reform agreement to strengthen the delivery of preschool and fund Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, with the Victorian government providing funds to build new facilities to meet demand. The fellowship is timely, with Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers currently expanding their early childhood education programs, or writing new ones, to meet the demand for more professionals to enter the sector.

The methodology chosen was an inquiry approach, a flexible and fluid approach where practitioners develop and investigate theories about what works and why. There were two phases to the

investigation. Firstly, an information-gathering exercise in Australia to gain an overview of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches as they are applied in the local context, and secondly, a trip to Italy to explore the approaches as they are implemented in their historical-cultural context. Observations, interviews, site visits and examination of documents and artefacts were the methods used to collect information.

Fellowship learnings fell into three main themes: Child at the centre; teacher, researcher, progettista, and sustainability. The focus of the first theme, 'Child at the centre' was a hybrid Study Tour to the Loris Malaguzzi Center in Reggio Emilia, a three month long professional journey for those with previous knowledge of the approach who wished to gain deeper insight into it (Appendix 1). Due to the disruption of Covid_19 restrictions, classes and workshops were held online from January to March 2022, and, once travel resumed, I was able to visit the Centre in person to complete the tour. Key learnings included the powerful effect of community participation in the life of the education setting, the emphasis on creativity through the 'hundred languages' of children and the importance of beauty in the environment as an activator of learning for the individual. Viewing the teacher as researcher and progettista (or director of projects) was an important element in the professional learning and development of adult learners at the Montessori Training Center at Perugia and the Opera Nazionale Montessori (ONM) in Rome. Of particular interest was the collaboration between ONM and LUMSA Universite di Roma to offer a master's level teaching qualification specialising in Montessori education (3-6 years). To date, no university or tertiary provider in Australia offers a Bachelor or Master program with a Montessori specialisation stream.

Both the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches to education value sustainability and it is firmly embedded in their day-to-day interactions with children and the environment. I was particularly impressed by two aspects of sustainability that I encountered in Italy, firstly, the extensive use of natural materials in early childhood spaces, and secondly, creative re-purposing, re-using and recycling as part of the Remida project. This project has a global reach with re-purposing centres located in cities around the world, including Perth, Australia.

The personal and professional impact of undertaking a fellowship is profound. There is the opportunity for personal growth and confidence-building, and the ability to learn from professionals who are experts in their fields. A significant benefit for me has been the realisation of what is possible regarding the preparation of early childhood professionals who wish to build a career in the sector. A long-term impact is that I can influence the next generation of early childhood professionals who will make a positive contribution to the lives of young children, their families and communities.

I have made recommendations in three main areas. Firstly, there is a need to strengthen content regarding the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches in subjects/units in ITE programs in early

childhood education. Attention must be paid to ensure that professional practice placements for undergraduates are in centres with good ratings from the Regulatory Authority. Secondly, ongoing, cost-effective professional learning opportunities might be provided for professionals who work in the sector and who are unable to meet the costs of expensive courses. Thirdly, the implications for policy change are many, and recommendations include the transition away from the corporate, for-profit model of early learning centres with the aim of co-locating them in schools. This is a lengthy and costly process, but change is overdue in this area.

Finally, options for further inquiry include, firstly, a future research project that examines the adjustments and adaptations made to the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches when applied to the Australian context. Secondly, it appears that little research exists into early learning in either approach for babies aged birth to two years. This could be of interest to many in the field of ECEC.

Abbreviations, acronyms and definitions

AMI	Association Montessori Internationale
BECE	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
HE	Higher Education
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MA	Montessori Australia
NQS	National Quality Standards
PL	Professional Learning
REAIE	Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

3. Fellowship Background

3.1 Context

Italy is regarded by early childhood professionals and researchers from countries around the globe as the ‘gold standard’ for quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). People travel thousands of miles to participate in study tours to Reggio Emilia or to visit Montessori training centres in Perugia or Rome. Parents put their names on long waiting lists in Australia, hoping to enrol their child in a Montessori or Reggio-Inspired setting. In Italy, infant-toddler centres and preschools are a highly valued part of the community where children, families and early childhood professionals all participate in a child’s learning journey. The underlying philosophies of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches put the child at the centre of their learning, as protagonists in their own growth and development. It is important to remember, however, that both approaches or philosophies have developed over decades and have evolved with time and context. They are unique: Italian history and culture are not things that can be easily replicated. ‘Cultural transposition’ of the approach is carefully considered throughout this Fellowship so the deepest meanings and values of these approaches are retained in a range of contexts.

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3.1.1 The early years

The early years in a child’s life have been acknowledged as important in forming the foundations for lifelong learning and social participation. It has long been recognised that having access to high quality early learning and care is a key factor in determining the long-term benefits and outcomes for children from birth to eight years of age (Hughes, 2022; Rouse & Spradbury, 2016). A child’s brain develops rapidly in the early years, with around 85 to 90 percent of brain development occurring in the first five years of life. Children’s environments, experiences and relationships in the first 1,000 days (from conception to age two) are particularly significant for brain development. Early childhood education helps children to develop high level cognitive, social and emotional skills in an environment that focuses specifically on them as children, bringing together their present and future needs. Prioritising children’s play is important in supporting their learning and development, unlocking children’s natural curiosity and providing opportunities to explore interests and develop social skills. The Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches value play with purpose, supported by adults, to develop children’s understanding of the world around them and to acquire specific skills.

3.1.2 The Australian context

Australia has a strong history of care and education in the field of early childhood, with the first kindergartens being established in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Many of these had their roots in philanthropic work and were firmly based in the tradition of middle and upper-class women’s charitable work. Others were established by women who were part of the first wave of feminism and who were vocal in adding to the debate about philosophies of education, control of educational institutions and the necessity, or otherwise, for training early childhood teachers

(Coady, 2017; Hughes, 2019). Since then, significant changes have taken place in the way that ECEC settings are managed and governed in Australia, particularly over the past four decades. The Australian policy context influences just about everything relating to teaching and learning in early childhood education, including the levels of qualifications, curriculum and access to services for children and families (Waniganayake et al., 2017). Historically, government involvement in ECEC has changed in accordance with changing priorities, social pressures and the political ideology of the day (Mahon, Bergqvist & Brennan, 2016). The structure of ECEC in Australia is complex. Our federated system of government has resulted in a patchwork of terminology, services and administrative and funding arrangements related to ECEC across jurisdictions. The provision of early learning and care takes place in a variety of settings including community-based, not-for-profit, school-based, for-profit centres and family or home care settings.

3.1.3 Governance and administration

The ways in which early childhood settings are governed, administered and managed has a huge impact on the staff, children, families and communities in which they operate. Unlike the school sector, where all Australian primary and secondary schools are highly regulated and administered directly by the government or by not-for-profit organisations, prior-to-school education and care providers in this country can be for-profit businesses and still receive government support. Consequently, in Australia we have a predominantly market-based model of early learning and education, like that which operates in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and New Zealand. This environment where 'big business' and shareholder profits are at the core of the organisation raises serious questions about the priorities of some of the profit-making providers. Most of the larger participants in the ECEC industry act as business operators as well as real estate owners of centres, maximising commercial profits for investors and shareholders (Peak Equities Pty. Ltd., 2021). Recent reports (Australian Workers Union, 2021 & 2022) found that ECEC centres run by large corporations and private equity companies deliver much poorer quality education and care outcomes than those run by community and not-for-profit providers. Put simply, when budgets are kept to a minimum, considerations such as professional learning opportunities that support staff in providing high quality teaching and learning approaches are generally not a priority for corporate providers (United Workers Union, 2021). However, the dominance of the large, for-profit private sector enterprises is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. This means that it is more important than ever for graduates who take up a position in many for-profit centres to have a good grasp of the learning approach used and have the capacity to advocate strongly for high quality education and care.

3.1.4 The workforce in challenging times

A professional and skilled workforce is fundamental to achieving quality early childhood education and high-quality learning and developmental outcomes. Of concern are the current challenges associated with the workforce, including attraction and retention, low remuneration, weak long-term career prospects, variable entry and registration standards, and lack of workforce diversity (including gender and cultural background) (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). A recent review undertaken by the New South Wales Government in partnership with the University of Wollongong identified concerning views expressed by several stakeholders across the country about the quality of pre-service training by some university and vocational education and training providers, and the preparedness of many graduates as a result. The review panel heard that graduates from both sectors felt that they were inadequately trained or skilled to work in early childhood settings, with many of these graduates having undertaken a combined early childhood and primary teaching degree (Siraj, Melhuish, Howard, Neilsen-Hewett & Kingston, 2018). For these learners, study of the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches will have been completed as a small part of a subject or unit covering a range of philosophies and educational models. Considering the high number of graduates who will be employed in settings where the Montessori or Reggio Emilia approaches are the preferred model or philosophy, more needs to be done to ensure that they are adequately prepared to provide high quality learning experiences for young children. Additionally, there is clearly a need in this country to better prepare graduates to the profession who are qualified, classroom-ready and who want to make a difference in the lives of children, their families and communities.

3.1.5 Montessori education and the Reggio Emilia approach in the local context

“Montessori” is not a trademarked name, so it is possible for any education service to include the word “Montessori” in their name or to advertise themselves as following the Montessori philosophy. However, in its role as the national body, Montessori Australia (MA) has established an Australian system to identify authentic practice for Montessori programs and to support education services in maintaining standards. Settings can apply for Montessori registration, where they are assessed by the national body as meeting Montessori standards. These settings will employ teachers who have obtained a Montessori teaching qualification (the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) Diploma) in addition to an Australian accredited teaching degree. Those who hold a VET qualification such as the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care might also have obtained the AMI Diploma and work as educators in the setting. The assessment process undertaken by a centre to obtain Montessori registration provides a supportive and positive means of continuous improvement by which education services strive to ensure quality and best practice (Montessori Australia, 2022). Many Montessori settings do apply for registration in Australia, however there are those that choose not to do so, and in these particular settings families and caregivers cannot be

guaranteed of high-quality learning and teaching programs that follow the Montessori approach. Similarly, outside of the town of Reggio Emilia, preschools and schools are free to use the term 'Reggio-Inspired' when describing their setting (the title 'Reggio Emilia Approach' is a registered trademark owned by the Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia). In Australia, early childhood centres and schools are supported by the Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange (REAIE), a national reference organisation for Reggio Emilia. According to its website, REAIE provides local meetings, workshops and tailored programs that promote dialogue, professional learning and research about the educational project of Reggio Emilia (REAIE, 2022). Many of the programs provided by REAIE can be costly and it is entirely up to the early childhood education setting (or the individual) whether they avail themselves of the opportunity or not. Some ECEC settings might claim they follow the Reggio Emilia approach, or provide a Montessori education, however this can be tokenistic and designed to attract clients to their business. Others state that they are 'doing Reggio' or 'doing Montessori', with all good intentions, but practitioners might have a superficial understanding of the theory and philosophy that underpin each approach. Recent studies have found that in some early childhood settings the approach was 'watered down' or altered significantly to appeal to parents or to gain money and prestige (Freeman, Dalli and Pickering, 2016; Landi & Pintus, 2022; Irving, 2016). These studies found that there was a positive impact on early childhood professionals when they were well-equipped with the skills and knowledge to promote and implement the relevant approach in early childhood services.

3.1.6 Challenges and solutions – small steps

Of significance is the current state of play in the early childhood sector (birth to five). It is a contested space and is currently under the spotlight in Australia, with national and state governments passing legislation to address serious workforce shortages and the inability of families living in many rural, regional and some urban areas to access early childhood education and care for their children (known as 'childcare deserts'). The Australian Government and all states and territories have agreed to the Pre-School Reform Agreement (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021), a four-year national reform agreement to strengthen the delivery of pre-school and better prepare children for the first year of school. The roll-out of this agreement will see three-year-old children in Victoria receive up to 15 hours of a funded kindergarten program each week. To cope with demand, the Victorian government has committed to building new publicly owned childcare centres in fifty locations across Victoria, with new kindergartens also being established, most of these being co-located in schools. With the expansion of sites and the rollout of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, early childhood professionals are urgently needed to take up positions in preschool programs in long day care centres, council-run kindergartens, community not-for-profit kindergartens and early years learning centres co-located in schools. The need is particularly acute in some rural, regional and urban areas that are difficult to staff. Providers of programs in the HE and VET sectors

are currently designing new early childhood education courses to meet this need, with potential applicants being offered HE scholarships and free Technical and Further Education (TAFE) positions. This Fellowship provides a timely opportunity for the Fellow to address learning content in a new early childhood degree program that will strengthen pre-service teachers' knowledge, skills and understanding of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches.

3.2 Methodology and timeline

An inquiry approach was chosen as the most suitable methodology, providing a way for me to build on my 'real-world' experiences, grounded in analytical and reflective practice. It is a multifaceted, flexible and fluid approach where practitioners develop and investigate theories about what works and why. The focus of inquiry can vary; however, it is always grounded in the interaction of practitioners with the environment, with them asking real questions, analysing and learning new information and working collaboratively with others to explore a range of possible responses to the questions they pose (Fingeret & Cockely, 1992). Two overarching questions guided the investigation.

In what ways do the Montessori and Reggio Emilia educational approaches inform and inspire pedagogical practices in early childhood education settings in the Italian context?

How do Montessori and Reggio Emilia organisations in Italy provide professional learning and/or professional qualifications for adult learners?

The Fellowship took place over an extended period in 2021-2022, culminating in a visit to Italy for four weeks during August and September 2022. There were two phases to the investigation. Phase One was an information-gathering exercise to gain an overview of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches in early childhood education in Australia. Although I am familiar with both approaches, I needed to appraise their application locally in order to deepen my understanding of how they are implemented in the local context. This phase included attendance at two local conferences: The Montessori 'Thinking Different: Supporting Neurological Differences in Early Childhood' in June 2022 (Gold Coast, Queensland) (Appendix 2) and the Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange July 2022 Research Symposium: 'Documentation as a tool for participation, learning and research' (fully online) (Appendix 3). Site visits to early childhood education settings in the Melbourne area were undertaken once Covid_19 restrictions had eased. Phase Two of the investigation involved: participation in a hybrid Study Tour centred on the Reggio Emilia approach (eleven weeks of remote learning in Australia) followed by travel to Italy to complete the Study Tour at the Centro Internazionale Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia; visits to the Montessori Training School in Perugia and the Opera Nazionale/LUMSA Universite di Roma. Observations, interviews, site visits (once Covid_19 restrictions had lifted) and examination of documents and artefacts were

the methods used to collect information during Phases One and Two of the study. Interviews with a range of experts in both approaches were conducted online and face-to-face during both phases, with these experts drawn from networking channels.

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The Fellowship was awarded in November 2021, in the midst of the Covid_19 pandemic when a range of restrictions had been imposed both locally and globally. There was no indication of when international travel might recommence, and initially it was not possible to visit kindergartens, pre-schools, and childcare centres due to the stringent guidelines in place to protect children, staff and families. Consequently, a more creative solution was sought involving the use of technology to meet with teachers, pedagogisti, atelieristi, educators and trainers in Australia and Italy. This worked well, other than some challenges with the time zone difference between the two countries. It meant that all workshops and presentations for the online component of the Study Tour in Reggio Emilia and one interview were conducted in the early hours of the morning Melbourne time. Zoom interviews were conducted with experts from Gonzaga (Italy), Queensland and Victoria. By the end of July 2022, all Covid_19 travel restrictions had been lifted for both domestic and international travel, and the need for a green pass in Italy had been revoked. This meant that I was able to travel freely throughout the country in order to undertake the Fellowship.



Figure 1. Phase One of this study included information-gathering in Australia prior to travel to Italy. Amy Kirkham is a registered AMI teacher trainer who welcomed me into her classroom at Kalker Montessori Centre, Bulleen, Victoria.

3.3 Biography

A long career in education has enabled me to undertake a range of roles across the early childhood, primary and tertiary sectors, holding multiple positions in teaching and leadership. Originally trained as a primary school teacher, majoring in Music and Performing Arts, I have worked in rural, regional and metropolitan schools in Australia and England. My roles in schools include classroom teacher, director of music, literacy intervention teacher, pre-school teacher and middle-level leader, while simultaneously completing several postgraduate qualifications in education. As a school leader I focused on curriculum development, professional learning for staff and whole-school literacy leadership. Coaching and mentoring others, particularly beginning teachers, was a key part of my role and one which influenced me in moving to the tertiary sector. When a new postgraduate program was being introduced by La Trobe University at the Albury Wodonga campus, I accepted a position as sessional lecturer for Music and Performing Arts and undertook this role in conjunction with my part time job at a local school. Upon moving to Melbourne after teaching in the UK for some years, I worked at a primary school before an opportunity to again venture into the tertiary teaching space presented itself. In 2011 I took up the role of full-time lecturer on the Bachelor of Early Childhood Teaching at Holmesglen Institute and I now hold the positions of Senior Lecturer and Course Leader. Since I began working at Holmesglen, I have completed a Doctor of Education (Educational Leadership) and written journal articles, book chapters and conference papers for a variety of academic publications and organisations.

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My greatest motivator as a teacher and researcher is a passion for supporting learning and creating new opportunities for learners of all ages and stages to strive for excellence. This Fellowship has been the culmination of my career in education, and I consider it a great honour to accept the award.

4. Fellowship Learnings

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The Fellowship journey enabled me to gain a wealth of knowledge and a deeper understanding of two approaches that are renowned globally for ‘best practice’ in early childhood education. It also gave me the opportunity to develop a network of local and international contacts in the field of early childhood education and initial teacher education. In this section, I shall outline the main features of the chosen approaches and describe the key learnings from both phases of the study that have emerged from this Fellowship experience. Key learnings have been woven into three themes that address the research questions driving the investigation. The three themes are, Child at the centre, Teacher, researcher, progettista and Sustainability.

4.1 Overview of the approaches

The Reggio Emilia Approach

To fully understand the Reggio Emilia approach, we must look back to the period immediately after the Second World War. The mothers of children in the small town of Reggio Emilia, in a show of collective responsibility, turned a disused building into the first nursery school. At the time, a young teacher, Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), directed the efforts of the townspeople in the establishment of the pre-schools and infant and toddler centres, eventually dedicating his life to the development of the Reggio Emilia Approach (Edwards, 2003). Malaguzzi was a social constructivist, who believed that children could learn to engage in dialogues and debates with others in a non-violent and constructive manner and develop problem-solving skills (Edwards, 2003). Relationships with others are a key principle of the approach, as is participation between families, teachers and communities. There is no formal training or qualification associated with the Reggio Emilia Approach, however Professional Learning (PL) is an important factor in building understanding and awareness of the meanings and methods of the approach. Professional Learning opportunities provided by the Reggio Children organisation are rigorous and intensive.

Twelve principles guide the Reggio Emilia Approach. One of the twelve principles addressed during the study tour was the ‘the hundred languages’ of children, a metaphor for describing the enormous potential of children to express themselves through words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, and music, to name a few. Another important principle covered was ‘the environment as the third teacher’, where aesthetically pleasing environments allow children to learn through the embrace of natural light, order, beauty and purpose. A third principle addressed during the study tour was ‘progettazione’ (projects), where the active process of planning and designing teaching and learning experiences does not take place through a pre-defined curricula but is carried out through a process of observation, documentation, reflection and interpretation. This lack of a clear-cut methodology or curriculum is interpreted differently in different contexts around the globe. In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), developed by the Australian Government, guides early childhood education.

The Reggio Emilia approach is closely aligned with the EYLF, where children are viewed as active thinkers and learners. Early childhood professionals are active participants in children's learning, observing them, documenting their progress and partnering with parents to support their children. However, concerns have been raised (Landi & Pintus, 2022) about the tendency to superficially replicate Reggio-like environments without critical reflection on the variety of cultural and organisational differences. 'Cultural transposition' of the approach is kept front of mind throughout this Fellowship so the deepest meanings and values are retained. The process takes the form of a deep and reflective dialogue between different educational practices and an awareness that 'things, somewhere else are done differently' (Landi & Pintus, 2022).

The Montessori Approach

In a Montessori setting, children are inspired towards a lifelong love of learning where they become confident, responsible, independent learners who trust in their own abilities (Montessori Australia, 2022). Dr Maria Montessori, a physician, anthropologist and pedagogue, developed her unique method of educating children over a long professional career. While working as a medical doctor, she became interested in child development and education, opening her first Montessori school in Rome in 1907. Dr Montessori took a special interest in children with learning differences and advocated strongly for training programs to be implemented for teachers working in this area. The notion of social reform through education developed and matured throughout Dr Montessori's life (Association Montessori Internationale, 2022) and she oversaw the establishment of Montessori schools all over the world. One of her greatest accomplishments was the founding of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in 1929 and today this non-profit organisation supports its education philosophy globally.

In Montessori education, children are grouped into multi-age classrooms (birth – 3, 3-6), spending three years with the same teacher to promote adult-child continuity and close peer relationships. 'Nido' the Italian word for 'nest', is the name given to the early childhood setting for infants, who, once they are ready, join the toddler group. Rather than a classroom, this space is a nurturing community where young children experience their first structured contact with other children (Montessori Australia, 2022). In the 3 -6-year-old setting, the main areas or 'pillars' in the pre-school program are addressed: Practical Life, Sensorial Materials, Mathematics and Language and Observation of Nature. Emphasis is also placed on the creative arts, music, science, geography and cultural studies. Montessori education and the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) work hand-in-hand to positively support children's learning and development from birth to age six. Children are given the optimal learning environment, materials and guidance to discover their full potential (Montessori Academy, 2022). Early childhood professionals guide and help children individually, with the learning happening at the child's own pace. This system of education focuses on the notion of fostering independence, competence and confidence in young children.

The role of beauty in the Montessori classroom is fundamental, for it is intimately tied to children's education, evoking interest in the materials and in learning (Haskins, 2012).

4.2 Theme 1: Child at the centre

16 To make a lovable school - industrious, inventive, liveable, documentable and communicable, a place of research, learning, recognition and reflection, where children, teachers and families feel well - is our point of arrival. (Loris Malaguzzi, 1998).

The in-depth study tour involved a 3-month professional learning journey for those with previous knowledge of the Reggio Emilia approach who wished to gain deeper insight into the main theme of 'Constructing curriculum in everyday life'. During this study tour I was able to meet with leading pedagogisti, Daniela Lanza and Maddalena Tedeschi, and other professionals from the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre who presented lectures and workshops. Participants connected from over forty countries across the world, and sessions were conducted in Italian with English translation in real time. Visits to an Infant-Toddler centre and a preschool are considered an important element of the study tour, however, the health regulations in force in Italy meant that visits were not allowed, and this ruling continued throughout 2022. To answer this challenge, a virtual tour was conducted in one Infant-Toddler centre, giving a 'bird's eye view' of teaching and learning experiences involving children and early childhood professionals. Following on, a panel comprised of families and community members spoke to us about their experience of the Reggio Emilia approach and its impact on their children, family members and the wider community. A short question and answer session followed, with immediate translation from Italian to English. Small-group workshops were divided into geographical locations, and I was able to engage with professionals from Sydney, Perth and Melbourne. The opportunity to discuss our learnings through our 'Australian eyes' added another dimension to the experience. During our conversations I was reminded that although we live in a different context and culture, the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach remain unchanged.

The course was divided into three threads with fifteen hours of live meetings and study material available to participants. The first thread, titled 'The right to participation' examined the ways that children and adults contribute to the construction of the community's culture. A key principle of the Reggio Emilia Approach is that of 'partecipazione' by all involved in the life of the education setting, children, teachers, parents and community. The second thread of the Study Tour, titled 'The right to wonder', explored how the 100 languages can be listened to and amplified, characterising children's knowledge and their competencies in doing and thinking. The third and final thread, 'The right to beauty', examined aesthetics in knowledge processes, an important activator of learning for the individual, and of groups of children and adults. In the next section of the report I will elaborate on each of the three threads.



Figure 2. The entrance to the Loris Malaguzzi Centre in Reggio Emilia. 'One city, many children'. (Photo taken by author and used with permission).

4.2.1 Thread One: The Right to Participation

At the centre of the Reggio Emilia approach is the notion of the child as an active participant, with control over their own learning, rather than children's learning adhering to a set of pre-determined outcomes. This differs from traditional educational systems where the child may be perceived as a 'blank slate', to be filled with knowledge. Parents are integrated into their children's learning as partners in the process. One interactive session during the Study Tour was conducted virtually in an Infant and Toddler Centre in Reggio Emilia. The session included a panel comprised of parents, grandparents and community members, and it was interesting to note that grandparents were deeply involved and quite vocal in the discussions. Grandparents, particularly, take an active role in the early education and care of grandchildren in Italy, in contrast to Australia where they generally take on more of a background support role for parents. Grandparents have much to offer, not just as 'child minders' but as active partners in the learning and development of young children.

During my visit to Reggio Emilia, I was struck by the cleanliness and beauty of the city, and the way that the locals cared for their environment. There was a deep sense of community in the day-to-day interactions of residents with one another, and the inclusion of children in the activities that were held in the piazza during my visit. This ethos of 'partecipazione' is carried through to their education system. The Reggio Emilia educational project highly values the role of the community as an integral part of young children's learning, and describes it in the following way:

Participation is the value and the strategy that defines the way in which the children, the educators, and the parents are stakeholders in the educational project. Participation generates and nurtures the feelings and culture of solidarity, responsibility and inclusion. (Reggio Children, 2017, p. 50).

In Italy, the majority of early ECEC settings are governed and managed by local municipalities, with a strong concept of participation in children’s early learning by families and the communities in which they are located. This situation is quite different to that in Australia, where, as already mentioned, we have a market-based model of early childhood education and care where much of the sector is viewed through the lens of ‘big business’ and is linked to women’s workforce participation. In contrast, sixty seven percent of ECEC centres in Italy that cater for children aged birth to three years are managed by public entities (local municipalities) with the remainder consisting of mostly religious and non-profit organisations and some private providers. The figures are similar for children aged 3 – 6 years of age. (Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, 2020). This idea of ‘partecipazione’ and a strong belief in the need for community investment in children is embedded within education policies and systems in Italy, where high quality early learning is seen as a community good.

Perhaps a shift in thinking is needed in our local context, putting children and families at the heart of decision-making in all matters regarding early childhood education and care.



Figure 3. The Municipal Offices of the Comune di Reggio nell’Emilia (Office of Education) is located in the historical centre of Reggio Emilia. These administrative offices include the Centre for Families and Schools for Infants and Toddlers. (Photo taken by author)

4.2.2 Thread Two: The Right to Wonder

The 'Atelier' is a central concept to Reggio Emilia pedagogy: It is a place of learning, research, invention and creativity expressed through the 'hundred languages' of children. The Atelier is a shared environment where children engage with a range of materials designed to provoke creativity and discovery. These 'provocations' take the form of project-based learning (protezione) or play-based experiences. The 'Atelierista' has a background and qualifications in education and the creative arts, and they work with teachers and educators to devise and facilitate learning experiences and support the ongoing documentation of children's learning. Inside the Atelier rooms at the Loris Malaguzzi centre, materials such as clay, paper, leaves, wood, fabric and wool are set out, just as they would be for children. Participants on the study tours experiment, create and work together to complete a project or discover new ideas. 'The Secrets of Paper' Atelier presented an amazing experience where participants were encouraged by leading atelierista, Federica Castrico, to investigate the qualities of a commonplace material to 'discover its anatomy, its capacity for becoming plastic and malleable, for holding the memory of gesture, for generating, and being regenerated' (Reggio Emilia, 2022). Working with the atelieristi, we were guided in strategies that can be used to encourage children's experimentation, intuition and spontaneous creativity through a free expression of ideas. Exposure to creative art development supports children's critical skills, including motor skills, cognitive development, and social and emotional skills. Of particular note was the assumption that even very young children could use, with guidance, small tools, fine drawing pencils and pens and other recycled and upcycled materials which, in the Australian context, would be viewed by many as not developmentally appropriate or a safety risk. This concept is also a feature of Montessori education where glass and ceramics are routinely used whenever possible to teach children to use fragile and breakable items with care and respect. Trusting in the capability of young children and minimising the risk of harm can ensure that the materials and the environment allow children to grow, learn and develop.



Figure 4. Young children are encouraged to use drawing materials of all shapes and sizes. (Photo taken by author and used with permission)



Figure 5. 'The Secrets of Paper' atelier at the Loris Malaguzzi Centre, Reggio Emilia. (Photo taken by author and used with permission)

4.2.3 Thread Three: The Right to Beauty

A beautiful environment encourages children's natural sense of awe and wonder. In the words of Loris Malaguzzi,

We place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security. (Loris Malaguzzi, 1998).

The environment plays a key role in fostering a child's self-esteem and an understanding of their own competence. Aesthetically pleasing environments can help with concentration while offering rich visual stimuli and hands-on sensory experiences that allow children to reach their full potential. This thread of the study tour highlighted the role of the environment as the 'third teacher' and explored ways that early childhood professionals can go deeper than what is merely seen on the surface to develop a rich understanding of children's thinking, questioning and curiosities. Designing environments that foster creativity must be at the core of teaching practice, where children and early childhood professionals use space and materials to ignite learning. Similarly, Montessori education values an artistically beautiful environment, one that is inspirational and uplifting, supporting children in their learning journey.

4.3 Theme Two: Teacher, Researcher, Progettista

Imagination does not become great until human beings, given the courage and the strength, use it to create. (Dr. Maria Montessori).

The Montessori Training Center is located in the hillside city of Perugia, Italy, and is one of the earliest training schools set up by Dr Maria Montessori. Some areas of the school were closed during my visit as the summer term had not yet commenced, however I was given a guided tour of the main building and the Maria Montessori piazza, an important landmark in Perugia. The Montessori Training Center offers two courses to prospective learners. Firstly, the AMI Primary Diploma is available to applicants over the age of eighteen and is a twelve-month program that prepares learners to work with children aged 3-6 in a Montessori setting. By itself, the diploma does not automatically qualify the holder to teach, although some applicants may already have a recognised four-year early childhood teaching degree (Montessori Training Center Perugia, 2022). To successfully complete the diploma, AMI stipulates that these requirements be met:

- A minimum of 90% attendance at lectures and tutorials
- A minimum of 140 hours of supervised practice sessions with Montessori materials
- Ninety hours of observation and a minimum of 80 hours of teaching practice in AMI Montessori classrooms

The curriculum is designed so graduates are competent and capable of working in a Montessori classroom, are experienced with the model of education, and understand the principles of a Montessori education well enough that they are able to adapt to any given situation. Coursework covers child psychology, child development and pedagogical teaching practice, observation in classrooms and completion of a practicum component. Lecturers and teachers are in daily contact with learners, who attend the training centre from Monday to Friday, 9 am until 4 pm (Montessori Training Center, 2022).

The second course offered by the Montessori Training Center is completed in conjunction with Opera Nazionale Montessori, Rome. Applicants need to have a recognised teaching degree within the Italian system if they wish to undertake this program, and once graduated, they are able to seek employment, not just as qualified Montessori teachers, but as educational leaders, mentors and advisors in pre-school settings. During my visit to Opera Nazionale Montessori in Rome I was given a tour of the Center and was able to learn more about this program, thanks to the wonderful staff there, and in the following section of the report I explain my learnings.



Figure 6. Inside the Montessori Training Center, Perugia. (montessoritrainingcenter.it)



Figure 7. The Palazzo Sorbello Casa Museo in Perugia has artefacts pertaining to Maria Montessori on display. These photos show part of a collection of children's toys, musical instruments and learning materials. (Photo taken by author)



Opera Nazionale Montessori; LUMSA University of Rome

We must help children from the very beginning. We must give them the right environment because they have to adapt themselves to a strange new world. (Dr. Maria Montessori, 1946).

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It is a requirement in Australia and in Italy that teachers hold a recognised teaching qualification in early childhood when working in the sector. My visit to Opera Nazionale Montessori focused on its collaboration with LUMSA University of Rome in offering a master's level teaching qualification that gives learners the opportunity to integrate their academic path with a Montessori specialisation in early childhood education (3 – 6 years). On completion of this degree, learners are able to progress to a second-level Professional Master (by research) and a PhD in early childhood education, or to take up a position of leadership in the sector. Currently, no Australian university or tertiary education provider offers a Bachelor or Master program with a Montessori specialisation stream. There is, however, one Registered Training Organisation (RTO) located in Western Australia, Montessori World Education Institute (Australia) Inc., that offers several recognised Graduate Diploma of Education (Montessori) programs for learners who wish to teach children from birth to six years. Applicants need to have already attained a recognised four-year teaching degree in Australia to enrol in a program.

My visit to Rome enabled me to spend time with Associate Professor Paola Trabalzini of LUMSA University of Rome and Vice President Elena Dompe of Opera Nazionale Montessori. Our meetings gave me a deep insight into the LUMSA Master of Teaching degree course which aims to 'produce specialists capable of analysing educational needs and design, promote, organise, coordinate and assess education services in early childhood education' (LUMSA University of Rome, 2021). Learners are given the knowledge and skills to teach, to lead and manage early childhood education facilities and to respond to the new need for regional educational co-ordination as stipulated by Italian law (known in Italy as 'La Buona Scuola' or 'The Good Schools Plan'). The program's combination of educational, pedagogical and leadership subjects make it one-of-a-kind, not just in Rome, but throughout the world. At the time of my visit, places in the program for the 2023 academic year had already reached capacity and enrolments had closed.

Entry into the master's degree program at LUMSA requires the completion of a recognised Initial Teacher Education qualification, either a bachelor or postgraduate degree in teaching. In addition to the core subjects studied, students are required to select from two specialisations: 'Montessori training for early childhood' or 'Psychology and educational services'. The two-year full-time program is intensive, with five academic subjects studied each semester (ten subjects over one academic year). In addition, there is a professional practice component involving 20 hours each semester of classroom observation and two weeks of internship in a Montessori classroom. A



Figure 8. Inside the Opera Nazionale Montessori in Rome. (Photo taken by author and used with permission)



Figure 9. One of the training rooms at the Opera Nazionale Montessori Centre in Rome. <https://www.operanazionalemontessori.it/>



Figure 10. Dr Mary Hughes with Vice President Elena Dompe and Associate Professor Paola Trabalzini (LUMSA University of Rome) at the Opera Nazionale Montessori Center in Rome. (Photo taken by author and used with permission).

mix of face-to-face and online teaching is provided as part of the program, although for working students or those with specific needs, intensive teaching periods are provided at weekends with additional online activities to support independent study. Internships, research and workshops are undertaken in collaboration with numerous educational institutions, including Montessori (national and international) and other associations and institutions. The early childhood sector in Italy faces many of the same challenges as it does in Australia, particularly in the areas of low pay and difficult working conditions. In my meetings with Associate Professor Trabalzini and Elena Dompe we discussed the issue of qualified early childhood teachers who choose to move into primary school teaching where they are paid more and working conditions are better. This adds to the workforce and skills shortages in ECEC that are currently under scrutiny both in Australia and in Italy.

4.4 Theme Three: Sustainability

Almost everyone in the city of Reggio Emilia rides a bike. The bikes are sturdy, built to last and can withstand the rigours of constant use. There appears to be no need for the townspeople to have the latest and most expensive model – the bikes are utilitarian everyday objects. So it is with most tools, devices, instruments, utensils and machines in Italy that are well designed and built to last. The concept of re-use, recycle and reduce is part of the culture, not just in Reggio Emilia but all over the country. Both the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches to education value sustainability and it is firmly embedded in their day-to-day interactions with children and the environment. In this report, I focus on just two aspects of sustainability that I encountered on my Fellowship journey, firstly, the use of natural materials and secondly, creative recycling as part of the Remida project.



Figure 11. Bikes are parked outside the Municipal Library in the centre of Reggio Emilia. Bikes are utilitarian, everyday objects that are well-built to withstand everyday use. (Photo taken by author)



Figure 12. Each nursery, preschool and school is a new and original project. Listening to needs, relating to the context and creating solutions are key to designing modern, functional and innovative spaces. <https://www.gonzagarredi.com/en/projects/>



<https://www.gonzagarredi.com/en/projects/>



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Figure 13. Recycling and upcycling objects and materials is a feature of the Montessori approach, and during my visit to the Kalker Road kindergarten in Bulleen, Melbourne, centre director Amy Kirkham explained that some of the items used daily by the children were found in vintage and second-hand shops. (Photo taken by author and used with permission).

4.4.1 Natural Materials

Montessori education promotes the use of natural materials such as wood, paper, fabric and metal, which provide children with sensory experiences as well as opportunities for learning through play. Dr Maria Montessori promoted the use of natural materials and objects that could be created from recyclable materials and the use of natural raw materials for furniture. I was fortunate to meet with Michele Dal Trozzo, Director of Business at GonzagaReddi Montessori (GAM), who explained the processes undertaken to design, manufacture and market innovative and customised furniture solutions for nurseries, preschools, schools, libraries and cultural centres. The company also manufactures Montessori learning and teaching materials. GAM is the only company in Italy whose products are certified by the AMI association, and each item is carefully crafted in terms of quality of the materials and the materials used. Michele explained that all products used in the manufacturing process (even the glue) are regularly tested in accredited laboratories for safety, resistance and toxicity. GAM crafts not only traditional Montessori furniture and materials but designs and creates modern, functional and innovative projects for nurseries, preschools and schools. Desaturated colours are intentionally used (as they are in Reggio Emilia environments) allowing early childhood professionals to ‘personalise’ the rooms and add colours that highlight children’s activities as they explore their world.

4.4.2 Remida – The Creative Recycling Center

30 Remida (The Creative Recycling Center) is a cultural project of sustainability, creativity and research on waste materials, located in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and managed by Reggio Children – The Loris Malaguzzi Center Foundation (Appendix 4). Remida promotes the idea that ‘waste, the imperfect, is the bearer of an ethical message capable of prompting reflections, proposing itself as an educational resource, thus escaping the definition of ‘useless’ (Reggio Children, 2022). During my tour of the Remida centre in Reggio Emilia I was able to explore the many rooms where used objects are displayed neatly and attractively, ready to be selected by teachers, parents, artists and other members of the community who have taken out a yearly subscription. Particularly impressive were the installations showcasing how these objects and artefacts could be used creatively. The centre is a place where research is conducted on sustainability and creativity starting from industrial waste materials. It is visited every year by more than 6,000 people, including teachers, artists, students, administrators and interested people from all over the world (Remida, 2022). Research into sustainability is a key element of the activities at Remida, as is collection of materials that would otherwise go to waste; training programs; special events and ‘Salvato da Remida’, a book exchange project run by volunteers. Remida centres have grown beyond Reggio Emilia and include centres for creative recycling in many Italian cities as well as a global network. Perth is the only Australian city that is an active part of the international network of Remida centres, with a dedicated site housing workshops, a resource area for educators and artists, a professional learning facility and a business area for collections.



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Figure 14. Each day as I walked to the Loris Malaguzzi Center, I used the pedestrian walkway at the railway station in Reggio Emilia. On the wall is a permanent installation Bicitante (Bikes...lots!) an educational, ecological, urban project involving children from Infant-toddler centres to high school students in collaboration with Remida Recycling Center. The project, conducted over many years, showcases a collection of over 700 material graphics of unpredictable bicycles, made with traditional graphics and with waste materials reinvented and recomposed in the digital environment. <http://www.remida.org/attivita-2/ricerca/>





Figure 15. Installations at the Remida Recycling Center showcase the creative ways that waste materials can be used. The materials come from around 200 companies that donate off-cuts, faulty materials, warehouse funds or excess production destined for disposal, which the centre recovers and in part distributes to more than 400 preschools, schools and other institutions for socio-cultural purposes. <http://www.remida.org/> (Photo taken by author and used with permission)

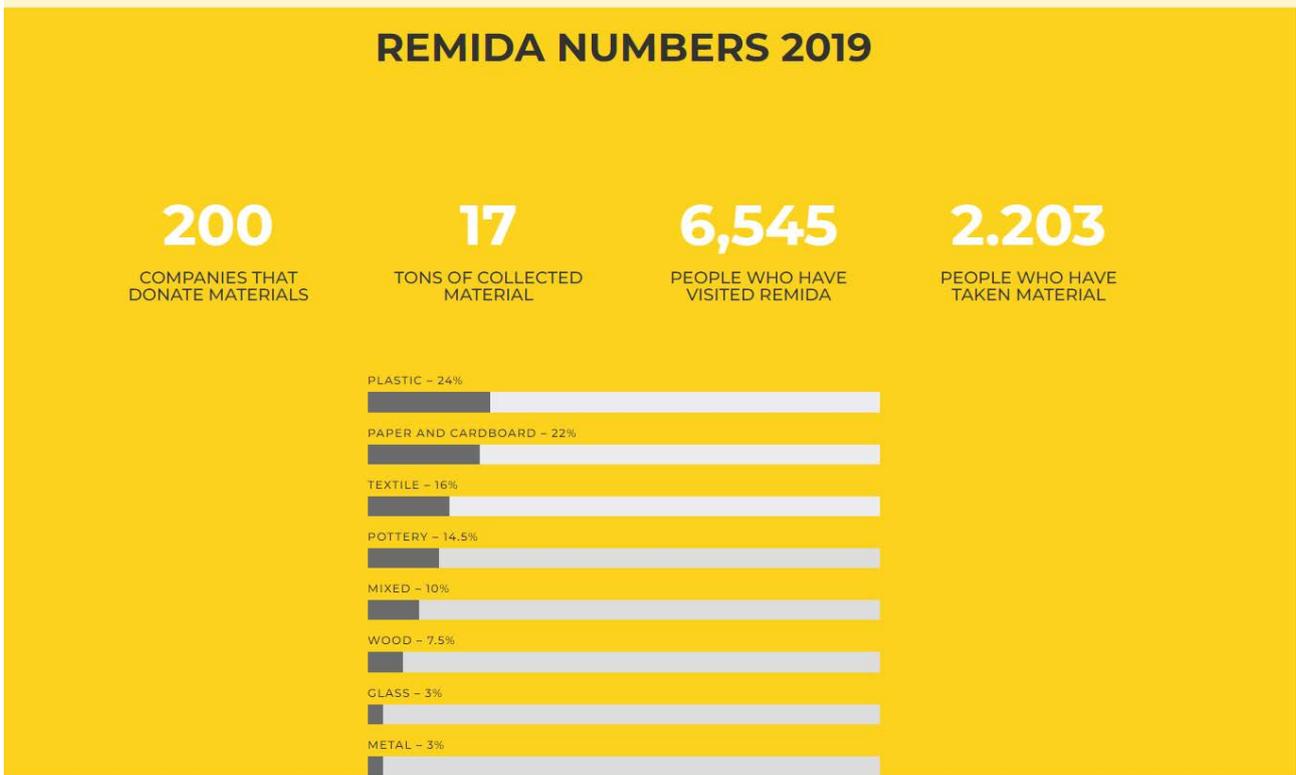


Figure 16. Figure 1: Data collected for REMIDA usage during 2019 shows extensive support for the program throughout the Reggio Emilia community and beyond. <http://www.remida.org/>

5. Personal, professional and sectoral impact

Evaluating the impact or results of a Fellowship can take time. The effectiveness of impact can be measured in the short, medium and long-term, and in the case of this Fellowship, a future-focused improvement cycle of inquiry can be used to measure positive changes at the professional and sector levels. The challenge is to determine how the evidence of impact is identified and how it can be linked to improvements in practice. The existing and potential ways that positive impact can be felt personally, professionally and within the sector are listed below.

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5.1 Personal impact

The personal impact of undertaking a Fellowship is profound. Being given the opportunity to explore early childhood learning approaches in an international context has given me a sense of personal growth and increased my confidence, particularly in the area of networking with professionals in my field. I have learned much from my colleagues in Italy and have built a global understanding of best practice approaches in early learning.

- Throughout the Fellowship journey I was struck by the engagement between early childhood professionals, families and members of the communities they live in. Undertaking the Fellowship has prompted me to reflect on the nature of communities and the importance of relationships within those communities. I have a deeper understanding and appreciation of children and families and the importance of making good decisions, as a community, that respect and prioritise their needs.
- Meetings and discussions with academic staff from the Montessori and Reggio Emilia institutions I visited has increased my knowledge and understanding of both approaches, giving me more confidence when teaching HE and VET learners within their respective programs.
- The professional learning opportunities provided to me by the Fellowship have been immense. Engaging with experts in the field from Montessori Education and the Reggio Emilia project has deepened my knowledge and understanding of the approaches and increased my level of expertise within the Australian context. I can speak with confidence on the topic of child-centred pedagogy as an expert in the area.
- Living a sustainable lifestyle has always been important, however, this fellowship journey has helped to redefine my personal interpretation of 'sustainability'. I found it inspiring to visit the Remida Recycle Center and see how adults and children use familiar materials creatively, in unfamiliar ways. Children's imaginations can be ignited, providing a starting point for experimentation and learning. On a day-to-day basis, ensuring that I purchase items of good quality that will stand the test of time, recycling and repurposing 'waste' materials, and walking, cycling or using public transport rather than driving the car are just some of the small but significant lifestyle choices I can make that contribute to a more sustainable world.

- One of the highlights of this Fellowship was my meeting with Her Excellency, Margaret Twomey, Australia's Ambassador to Italy, at her residence in the hills above Rome. Margaret gave me a warm welcome and we spent the morning discussing the Fellowship, our early days growing up in Shepparton and the strong friendship between our families. It was a wonderful way to finish my Fellowship travels before flying back to Melbourne the following day.

5.2 Professional impact

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Gaining access to the inner workings of the different institutions I visited was eye-opening and has given me a greater knowledge and understanding of child-centred early learning approaches in a range of contexts. To measure the successful impact of the Fellowship in a professional capacity, the five levels of 'Evaluation of Impact' set out by Guskey (2000a) are a useful starting point. I have woven these levels of impact into the points below.

- **Positive engagement:** A significant benefit of the Fellowship has been the realisation of what is possible regarding the preparation of early childhood professionals who want to work in the sector. My visit to LUMSA University of Rome to examine their master's program gave me greater insight into the possibility of including Montessori education as a specialisation stream in a recognised degree course. Implementing this change in the Australian context is a difficult and time-consuming task but will provide an additional pathway for those learners who wish to specialise in Montessori education. In addition, exploring creative solutions to the challenges imposed by Covid_19 in the early phase of the Fellowship became a necessity, and the lifting of restrictions part way through 2022 was a welcome relief both professionally and personally.
- **Growth in knowledge and skills:** The Study Tour at the Loris Malaguzzi Center in Reggio Emilia revealed the unexpected ways that can be used by teachers and educators to ignite children's curiosity, creativity and imagination. Looking at children's learning from a new and different perspective is something that can be included in subject and unit materials for the undergraduate degree course currently under construction. Participation in the Study Tour establishes me as an expert in the area, both at my workplace and in the wider field.
- **Organisation support and change:** As Course Leader, I have greater confidence in leading the team in the planning and implementation process for the new undergraduate degree course. My organisation has been very supportive of the Fellowship and embraces the successful impact of future-focused improvement (see Appendix 5). There are ample opportunities within my organisation to disseminate the findings from this Fellowship to a wider audience.
- **Learners' use of new knowledge and skills:** Once the new learnings from this Fellowship have been included in course material, measures of learners' achievement and progress can be established that will assist in understanding and evaluating the effectiveness of the Fellowship learnings.

- Outcomes for learners: Indicators of learners' progress such as assessments and tests can be mapped against learning outcomes to provide a clear picture in terms of impact of the Fellowship on the program.

5.3 Sectoral Impact

- High quality teaching and learning experiences provided by well-prepared and committed early childhood professionals give young children the best start in their life-long learning journey. The Study Tour to the Loris Malaguzzi Center in Reggio Emilia demonstrated the many ways that children's creativity and imagination can be supported and extended by knowledgeable experts in their field. As an advocate for ongoing, effective professional learning in the sector I have the ability to influence professional groups and communities of practice to extend and enhance professional learning opportunities for those who work in the field.
- Much of the knowledge, understanding and skills gained through this Fellowship can be applied to VET and HE learners. The Montessori Training Center in Perugia and Opera Nazionale in Rome provided diploma level courses and university qualifications. There is the potential for me to be influential at the VET and HE levels.
- Recently I was given the opportunity to present my fellowship experience to early childhood education VET staff at my workplace and this has resulted in a new collaboration to further investigate how the approaches can be strengthened across HE and VET courses in the TAFE system.
- Adaptations and adjustments made to the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches that enable them to fit the Australian context is an area of interest to many in the field. It is anticipated that the findings from this fellowship will be a springboard to further inquiry regarding implementation in the local context. As already mentioned, parachuting an approach to learning and teaching without close attention to how things might work in different ways within unique cultures and settings is problematic. As a member of various professional associations within the sector I am in a position to highlight this issue to groups and individuals who influence policy and practice in the ECEC field.
- It is anticipated that one long term effect of the fellowship will be on the next generation of children who are taught by highly skilled early childhood professionals. These professionals will have received explicit teaching and practical experience in the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches due to the proposed improvements made to undergraduate early childhood teaching degrees. In addition, graduates who complete the degree and move into the sector have the capacity, with ongoing professional learning, to lead and mentor others at their workplace. This is especially important in early childhood settings where quality of care might be rated as 'working towards National Quality Standard' by the Regulatory Authority. It is anticipated that

these graduates will have the capacity to lead improvements within their setting enabling a high standard of education and care to be achieved. As they gain experience and knowledge, they will make a valuable contribution to children's early development, learning and wellbeing.

- Dissemination of the findings from the Fellowship will take place during 2023. It is anticipated that in addition to guest speaker roles within my organisation, abstracts will be submitted for acceptance at the NCVET National VET Conference in July, Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Annual Conference in October and the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) in December. Two journal articles are planned for submission during 2023, one aimed at an early childhood publication and one with a focus on tertiary teaching.
- Finally, we can do much better in the area of sustainability. As a sector, ECEC influences our youngest citizens to be custodians of our planet in meaningful ways. Making transformative changes at all levels requires effort and commitment, and a powerful example of this can be seen in the Remida Recycling project in Italy. Again, through sharing the knowledge I have gained with undergraduates, VET and HE staff at my workplace, and professional colleagues in my broader networking circles, it is hoped that small steps might be taken to ensure a more sustainable future for everyone.

6. Recommendations and Considerations

The Fellowship investigation provides detailed insights into the Montessori and Reggio Emilia educational approaches and their application in the Italian context. It paves the way for broader inquiry into the approaches, particularly in the Australian context. Quality education programs are a key factor in children's overall success at school and beyond, and it must be acknowledged that steps have already been taken, reflecting a commitment by federal and state governments to early childhood education. These steps include the introduction of the Pre-School Reform Agreement (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021), the Victorian government's commitment to Three-Year-Old Kindergarten and the provision of scholarships and funding for applicants to HE and VET programs. Moving forward, the following recommendations are made.

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6.1 ITE programs

- Ensure that the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches to ECEC are explicitly taught to undergraduate learners in at least one, preferably two subjects or units throughout the program.
- Embed theory and practice from both approaches across a range of subjects in undergraduate programs.
- Seek closer collaboration with experts from local Montessori and Reggio Emilia organisations and invite guest speakers to share their knowledge with learners.
- Develop strong relationships with ECEC settings so that learners can integrate theory and practice in real life settings. Closer attention might be paid to where professional practical placements are to be undertaken, so that preference is given to high quality, accredited Montessori and Reggio Emilia settings that have been rated as 'Exceeding' and 'Excellent' under the National Quality Frameworks Ratings system.
- Embed sustainability education across multiple subjects in undergraduate programs. This ensures that early childhood professionals can support children to develop the creativity and critical thinking skills necessary to make informed decisions for change, improve the quality of their lives, and those of future generations. (Refer to ACECQA (2022) guidelines 'Sustainability in children's education and care'). <https://wehearyou.acecqa.gov.au/2016/01/28/sustainability-in-childrens-education-and-care/>

6.2 Ongoing Professional Learning

- Support those entering the profession, regardless of the type of learning approach that is used at the setting. The transition from study to work is a crucial time for graduates (HE and VET) and having additional time and support means they are better prepared to take on their role as early childhood professionals.

- Develop strong and effective mentoring programs that are funded by government, with clear and measurable goals and outcomes. Experienced professionals who are experts in the Reggio Emilia or Montessori approaches need to be provided with adequate time and remuneration for mentoring beginning professionals.
- Develop cost-effective, ongoing professional learning programs for early childhood professionals, on-site. For many of those who work in the sector, a study tour to Reggio Emilia or a short course at AMI in Perugia is simply not possible. REAIE and AMI offer a range of courses, however the cost is likely a barrier for many who work in the sector.
- Promote sustainable education networks that present ideas for early childhood professionals to engage in sustainable practices. ACECQA (2022) has a number of these listed on its website. <https://wehearyou.acecqa.gov.au/2016/01/28/sustainability-in-childrens-education-and-care/>

6.3 Implications for policy

- Provide greater public investment in early childhood education. This means transitioning away from the corporate for-profit providers and placing early learning centres in schools. This will be a gradual process over time but puts children first in the decision-making process.
- Ensure high quality early childhood education programs, such as the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches, are available for all children, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalised families. Staff must be well qualified and sufficiently remunerated and supported so that staff turnover is reduced.

6.4 Options for further inquiry

- Investigate research conducted in birth to age 2 settings as there appears to be very few studies published regarding implementation of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches in this age group.
- Explore the possibility of a future research project that examines the adjustments and adaptations made to the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches when applied to the Australian context.
- Explore the potential of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. Refer to Dr Catherine Holmes' work exploring the ways Ngaanyatjarra students in Australia respond to Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal early childhood context (Holmes, 2018) and University of South Australia, School of Education report 'Bringing culturally responsive pedagogies and Reggio Emilia education principles into dialogue: Children learning to live together in diverse communities. Final Report 2020' (Rigney, Sisson, Hattam & Morrison, 2020).

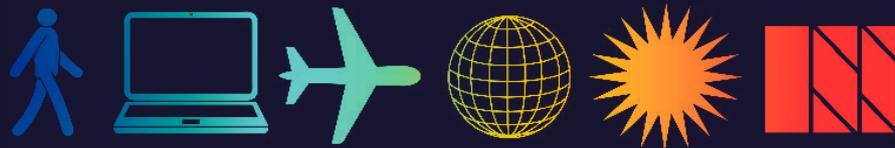
This is a time of great change, challenge and opportunity in the field of ECEC. My hope is that the knowledge gained through this Fellowship will contribute to a future where our youngest citizens receive the best quality teaching and learning experiences at the hands of highly skilled professionals in the field.

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