

Fall 2023 Sabbatical Leave Report

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Integrating Global Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

Summary

During my fall semester 2023 sabbatical, I had the incredible opportunity to immerse myself in the early care and education systems of Tampere, Finland and Reggio Emilia, Italy. These study tours have been transformative, providing me with invaluable insights and experiences that will shape my future work and contributions to our institution. I am immensely grateful for the support and encouragement I received to embark on this journey of professional and personal growth.

In Finland, the weeklong tour took me to multiple early childhood and elementary programs in and around the city of Tampere. While located in a region about 2 hours north of Helsinki, the programs were reflective of the coherent high-quality early care and education system developed across Finland. This consistent achievement of quality stands in stark contrast to the fragmented and under resourced early education system that exists in the US. I was struck by Finland's holistic approach to early childhood education, emphasizing play-based learning, teacher professionalism, and a deep respect for children's rights and well-being. The Finnish model's commitment to equity and inclusivity regardless of the public or private funding it receives has inspired me profoundly, broadening my perspective on what is possible in early education.



Finnish ECEC Study Tour Group Outside of an Early Childhood Center

Similarly, my time in Reggio Emilia illuminated the power of environments and community in nurturing children's minds. The opportunity to learn directly from

the pedagogisti, atelieristas, and classroom teachers of Reggio Emilia about their emphasis on creativity, collaboration, and documentation as tools for learning deepened my understanding of pedagogical practice. The stories shared of children's extended project work in the pre-primary schools were truly inspiring. Witnessing firsthand the intricate interplay between educators, families, children, and the environment reaffirmed for me the importance of building strong, supportive networks in educational settings.



Reggio Emilia Study Tour Delegation outside of the Loris Malaguzzi Cultural Center

A commonality expressed by the educators I encountered on both tours was the importance of early childhood teacher education and preparation. Both systems require a minimum of the bachelor's degree for teachers in lead positions.

Sabbatical Objectives	Outcomes
<p>Research and carry out two self-funded educational study tours in countries recognized internationally for exemplary schooling and early education systems. Visit individual early education programs in these regions to gather images, first-hand experience, and practitioner perspectives. Options include Finland, Italy, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.</p>	<p>I participated in two study tours:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tampere, Finland, sponsored by Learning Scoop (September 18 – 22, 2023) • Reggio Emilia, Italy, sponsored by Reggio Children (November 6 -10, 2023) <p>These experiences were both highly engaging and yet could not have been more different. In Finland, our study group had five participants: 3 educators from Laos, 1 from Armenia, and me. Despite our different home contexts, we discovered that we experienced many of the same challenges in providing early care and education and preparing new teachers. The small group afforded us an opportunity to go into one school each day and to engage in extended dialogue with our guides and each other. We experienced the Finnish value of trust, as we were given the opportunity to photograph in all locations and engage directly with children and teachers in the schools. While not the focus of my visit, I was highly impressed with the Finnish educational philosophy for P-20 education that “There are no dead-end pathways to higher education.”</p> <p>In contrast, the Reggio Emilia study delegation had over 100 participants, all from the US. This afforded me the chance to create new professional connections and discuss how we see Reggio Emilia pedagogy applied in the US. We were given limited opportunities to photograph and our group met daily in a large lecture hall at the Loris Malaguzzi Cultural Center. By design, Reggio Emilia's pedagogical approach is unique to them. While we are inspired by and adopt many of their practices, their educators urge us to reflect on how our own community values and cultures would transform their practices into something uniquely our own.</p> <p>One unexpected event of the study tour was a morning visit to REMIDA, the creative recycling center. The REMIDA serves as a creative resource hub, deeply rooted in the</p>

	<p>principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. Established in the 1990s, REMIDA repurposes industrial discards and surplus materials, transforming them into opportunities for imaginative exploration and artistic expression for children and adults alike. By offering a vast array of materials—from textiles to metals to electronic components—REMIDA fosters a culture of sustainability, creativity, and resourcefulness. The center not only supports educational practices that emphasize the importance of sensory experiences and hands-on learning, but also encourages environmental consciousness and the appreciation of diverse materials. To me, REMIDA exemplifies the incredible thought that Reggio educators put into everything they do— it is truly a sign of the value they place on early education. REMIDA employs atelieristas, i.e., artists trained in early childhood pedagogy, to curate the materials and coach teachers in how they might put them to in their classrooms. The classrooms I visited were filled these materials for children to use in their playful learning. (See pictures included above.)</p>
<p>Create multimedia course modules to update and expand upon the limited open education resources (OER) currently available for the Child, Family, and Community (CD M03/M03H) and Introduction to Curriculum (CD M14) courses. These materials will give students a broader look at educational programs from a global perspective. By examining the cultural, political, and economic contexts of international programs, students will better understand these early education systems and our own U.S. approaches. They will be able to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do high-performing countries approach early childhood education; • How were the systems developed; 	<p>As opposed to developing separate modules, which might serve to “other” these educational systems and their valuable approaches, I chose to integrate new pages and assignments into several modules of both my CD M03 and CD M14 Canvas courses. I’ve tested these course additions in Spring and Summer 2024 and will share them with colleagues this fall. (Screen shots of several pages are included in the Appendices.)</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do these approaches work so well in their contexts; • What are commonalities and differences among these systems, and • How these practices could be implemented in the United States. 	
<p>Investigate the possibility of developing a study abroad program proposal connected to the CD M03/M03H course, identify resources and contacts, and interview faculty from 2- and 4-year programs who have successfully developed study abroad experiences in early childhood studies.</p>	<p>I was inspired by the study tour experiences to develop a study abroad opportunity for our Moorpark College Teaching and Education students. The Finnish Company Learning Scoop that sponsored my tour would prove to be an excellent partner in planning a tour that is personalized to the needs and interests of our students. The Reggio Children group offers an annual spring study tour for students and faculty that might also be of interest. During my project, I also engaged in dialogue with EF Study Tours, the agency that has worked to develop programs with several faculty at MC. I look forward to submitting a Study Abroad Proposal when the Study Abroad Work Group is re-established!</p>

I am deeply thankful for this professional “bucket list” opportunity to engage with these pioneering educational philosophies and practices and the time to reflect upon how to apply the experiences in my work. The knowledge gained from these study tours will inform my future work, as I continue to make additions to course materials and assignments. I look forward to sharing the insights gained with colleagues, and collaborating to further enrich our programs in support our students' development. I am also inspired to continue exploring early education programs beyond our state and local context. In fact, during the summer of 2024, I have arranged to visit a Forest School in Anchorage, Alaska to further my understanding of nature-based learning and pedagogy. Beyond the materials already created through this project for my CD M03 and CD M14 courses (See examples in Appendix), I am eager to continue applying what I have learned to make a positive impact on my students, the campus, and the early education profession.

Finland Highlights



Finnish Elementary School Student Guides



Afternoon seminar sessions with one of our Guide

Reggio Emilia Highlights



Materials on Display in REMIDA

Appendix

Appendix A: Certificates of Participation

Certificate of participation

CYNTHIA SHEAKS

has participated in

Early Childhood Education Study Tour

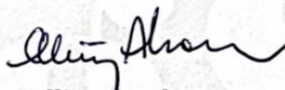
18.-22.9.2023
Tampere, Finland

The aim of the Study Tour was to give an overview of the **Finnish education system and early childhood education as an integral part of it**. The program included several visits to Finnish schools and day-care centers in the Tampere Region. The program introduced principles in Finnish early childhood education and how it is implemented in action.

Study Tour –program consisted of lectures on themes:

- Introduction to Finnish education system
- Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland
 - ECEC promoting learning
 - Individual support in ECEC
 - Co-operation in ECEC

Tampere, 22.9.2023



Ellimajja Ahonen

CEO



Study Group
North America

CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDANCE

Cynthia Sheaks

The Reggio Emilia Approach to Education

STUDY GROUP | 06/11/2023-10/11/2023

32 hours professional development in Reggio Emilia



Cristian Fabbi
President of Reggio Children

Appendix B: CD M03 and CD M14 Sample Canvas Course Pages

CD.M03.56379 > Pages > Taking a Global Perspective: Envisioning New Possibilities


View as Student Immersive Reader

Summer 2024

View All Pages

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Taking a Global Perspective: Envisioning New Possibilities



Recently, I had the incredible opportunity to participate in a week-long study tour of Finland's early education system. The snapshots above were taken in two of the schools I visited. The Finnish education system is of particular interest to educators due to its transformation into one of the best education systems in the world and its exemplary rankings on the PISA assessment (OECD, 2018). Notably, Finland's success came from studying the impact of other international approaches and enacting evidence-based reforms focused on providing equitable learning opportunities that support the well-being of the whole child. Keep in mind that children's developmental outcomes cannot be understood in isolation, but rather, in relationship to their environment. Accordingly, it is remarkable that Finland has achieved these results throughout their educational system, not just in one or two schools.

On the other hand, in the United States, there is mounting empirical evidence that the early education system is failing too many children (Kagan, 2020). In fact, our early childhood system has been called "broken," due to being underdeveloped, fragmented, and disorganized. As seen in the PISA results, the consequences of this problem ripple throughout our educational system in the form of opportunity gaps and inequitable outcomes for students. Because of this, it is critical to develop an understanding of early childhood approaches developed beyond our borders (Georgeson, Payler, & Campbell-Barr, 2013; Kagan, 2020). Without these examples, it is easy to get caught up in doing things the way they have always been done. At various points throughout our course, you will have the opportunity to take a broader, global perspective on class topics in order to envision new possibilities for our system.

Page 2

Images

Picture 1: Cindy (2nd from right) and colleagues in front of an Early Childhood Center in Kangasala, Finland.

Picture 2: Two student guides (on left) explaining their experience in the elementary school in Tampere, Finland.

CD.M03.56379 > Pages > Taking a Global Perspective: Parental Leave

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Taking a Global Perspective: Parental Leave

Considering both the concept of the **whole child**, discussed in our previous module, and the critical importance of attachment relationships, we can see that children's developmental outcomes reflect the entirety of their human experience, not just their educational experience. For children to develop to their fullest potential, their emotional, social, intellectual, and physical health must be nurtured from infancy. This is where social policies and programs, such as parental leave and health care (aspects of Bronfenbrenner's **ecosystem**), are shown to have a large impact upon development. For infants, the impact is particularly critical.

For this international example, we will once again return to Finland. Finland has often been described as one of the happiest countries in the world. The education and social welfare system, and how it embodies the country's deep-rooted values, is seen as key to the success Finland has seen in recent decades. Since paid parental leave is supported for all families, child care centers are generally not needed for infants until they are 10-months of age. Please watch the 12-minute clip below about the early support provided to families and their infants.



Retrieval Practice

- What specific examples of whole child development did you see in the film?
- What connections can you make between this approach to family support and infant attachment development?
- Describe the impact of this family support system on the child, family, and/or the community.
- If you are a parent, how does this system compare to what you experienced when you had an infant?


Previous Next

Summer 2024 View All Pages Published Edit ⋮


[Home](#)
[Announcements](#)
[Syllabus](#)
[Modules](#)
[Discussions](#)
[Student Services](#)
[People](#)
[Grades](#)
[TechConnect Zoom](#)
[Ally Course](#)
[Accessibility Report](#)
[Rubrics](#) ⊗
[Assignments](#) ⊗
[Files](#) ⊗
[Pages](#) ⊗
[Collaborations](#) ⊗
[Outcomes](#) ⊗
[Quizzes](#) ⊗
[Online Tutoring](#)
[NetTutor](#)
[Pope Tech](#)
[Accessibility](#)
[Library](#)
[Settings](#)

A Global Perspective: School Lunch in Finland ↗

On my tour of Finnish schools, I was so fortunate to be able to enjoy one of their famed school lunches in the elementary school I visited. Below are a few pictures from my experience. Notice that the food is freshly prepared. In both the elementary school and preschools I visited, children choose the quantity of foods they wanted.



Please watch the recording below that delves into the Finnish approach to school lunches-- a system where every student enjoys a nutritious meal free of charge. This policy not only nourishes young minds and bodies, but also fosters inclusivity by eliminating any stigma attached to receiving a free lunch. Let's discover the ingredients behind Finland's recipe for educational success.




CD.M14.580937 > [Pages](#) > A Global Perspective: Playful Learning in the Early Years 63 View as Student Immersive Reader

Summer 2024 View All Pages Published Edit ⋮

[Home](#)
[Announcements](#)
[People](#)
[Syllabus](#)
[Modules](#)
[Discussions](#)
[Grades](#)
[Studio](#)
[Student Services](#)
[Ally Course](#)
[Accessibility Report](#)
[Online Tutoring](#)
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A Global Perspective: Playful Learning in the Early Years ↗

For a more in-depth look at the role of play in learning, we will take a virtual and historical trip to Italy. The clip below begins at minute 14:44 in the documentary. Please watch the sections on Maria Montessori and the Preschool Programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy (about 11 minutes) until 25:22 minutes into the film. This documentary is a little older, but is still one of my favorites as it takes you inside of a Reggio Emilia classroom. The infant, toddler, and preschool programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy have been recognized as "the best in the world," and it is rare for visitors to be able to see these classrooms or take pictures. A brief anecdote of Maria Montessori's work in the early 1900's is also provided. We will be exploring Curriculum models including these in future modules, so this is also a little preview.



Retrieval Practice

Thinking back to the Continuum of Play and the criteria for playful experiences on the previous pages,


- What types of playful learning did you see in this film?
- What types of educator support did you see in this film?

CD.M14.58037 > Assignments > Curriculum Model Applications: The Reggio Emilia Approach 63 View as Student Immersive Reader

Summer 2024

Curriculum Model Applications: The Reggio Emilia Approach Published Edit

As we move along in the class, I invite you to learn more about different teaching styles, particularly the Reggio Emilia approach to learning. The preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia have been named the "Best in the World" so they are definitely worthy of further examination. To that end, I went on a study tour of the Reggio Emilia, Italy schools in fall 2023 -- what a remarkable experience! It was wonderful to see the place that I had been studying for so many years. I was not alone in my desire to see these programs -- below is a group shot of our entire delegation. There were more than 100 of us!



Instructions:

First,

Select and review one of the Edutopia resources below that shares how aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach have been applied in contexts beyond Italy.

- [Using the Reggio Emilia Image of the Child in Your Classroom](#)
- [Seven Ideas from Reggio Emilia that Any Early Childhood Educator Can Use](#)
- [A Student-Driven Approach to Experiential Learning](#)
- [Playful Inquiry for Elementary Students](#)

Next,

Create a brief (1- to 2- minute) audio or video recording of yourself discussing a teaching strategy or approach described in the resource that resonated most with you and why. Link or upload your recording to this assignment drop box. You can use any recording tool you prefer. Instructions for how to use the Canvas Studio are below.

Tips for Recording and Posting Video in Canvas

There are multiple ways you can record and share a video in Canvas. For this assignment, you can submit either the recording file (if it is a compressed file), a text entry with Canvas Studio, or you can submit a

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