

The Teacher as a Researcher

Observing, Listening, and Learning Alongside Children

Introduction

In many traditional classrooms, teachers are expected to have all the answers.

They plan the lessons.

They deliver information.

They assess learning.

They decide what comes next.

In the Reggio Emilia Approach, the role of the teacher is different.

Teachers are not simply instructors.

They are researchers.

This does not mean teachers conduct formal scientific studies.

It means teachers approach their work with curiosity, observation, reflection, and a genuine desire to understand children's thinking.

A Reggio-inspired teacher is constantly asking:

- What is this child thinking?
- What interests are emerging?
- What theories are children developing?
- How can I support deeper learning?
- What can I learn from the children?

Teaching becomes a process of inquiry rather than simply delivering information.

What Does It Mean to Be a Researcher?

Researchers are curious.

They observe carefully.

They gather information.

They look for patterns.

They ask questions.

They reflect on what they discover.

The same process applies to teaching.

Every day, children provide clues about:

- Their interests
- Their strengths
- Their challenges
- Their questions
- Their theories about the world

The teacher-researcher learns to notice these clues and use them to inform practice.

A Shift in Mindset

Traditional Teacher Thinking

"I need to teach this lesson today."

Researcher Thinking

"What are the children trying to understand?"

Traditional Teacher Thinking

"I need to finish the curriculum."

Researcher Thinking

"What learning is already happening here?"

Traditional Teacher Thinking

"The child is not following instructions."

Researcher Thinking

"What might this behaviour be communicating?"

This shift changes how teachers see children and learning.

Observation: The Foundation of Research

Observation is one of the most important tools available to educators.

When teachers observe carefully, they gain valuable insight into:

- Children's interests
- Learning styles
- Social interactions
- Problem-solving strategies
- Emerging skills

Observation allows us to understand before we intervene.

Looking Beyond What Children Do

Effective observation focuses on more than behaviour.

Instead of recording only what children are doing, we try to understand:

What are they thinking?

What are they wondering?

What are they trying to solve?

What theories are they developing?

Example

A group of children repeatedly pours water between containers.

A traditional observation might say:

"The children are playing with water."

A researcher observation might say:

"The children appear to be investigating volume, capacity, and cause-and-effect relationships."

The second observation reveals deeper learning.

Listening as a Research Tool

Listening is central to Reggio-inspired practice.

Listening is not simply hearing words.

It involves paying attention to:

- Conversations
- Questions
- Ideas
- Emotions

- Gestures
- Drawings
- Play themes
- Interactions

Children often reveal their thinking in unexpected ways.

A simple conversation can provide valuable insight into how children understand the world.

Reflection

Think about your classroom.

How often do you pause to listen without immediately correcting, guiding, or providing answers?

Listening often reveals more than teaching.

Documentation: Collecting Evidence of Learning

Researchers gather evidence.

Teachers do the same through documentation.

Documentation may include:

- Written observations
- Photographs
- Children's artwork
- Audio recordings
- Conversations
- Videos
- Learning stories

Documentation helps teachers:

- Revisit learning
- Identify patterns
- Plan next steps
- Share learning with families
- Reflect on practice

Documentation transforms fleeting moments into valuable learning evidence.

Making Learning Visible

One of the goals of documentation is to make learning visible.

Often, the most important learning is invisible.

We can see:

- A block structure.

But documentation reveals:

- The planning.
- The problem-solving.
- The collaboration.
- The persistence.
- The creativity.

Documentation allows us to see the thinking behind the action.

Reflection and Interpretation

Observation alone is not enough.

Researchers analyse and interpret information.

Teachers must do the same.

Ask:

- What does this observation tell me?
- What interests are emerging?
- What skills are developing?
- What questions remain unanswered?

Reflection turns observations into meaningful insights.

Following Children's Interests

One of the most powerful outcomes of teacher research is the ability to identify emerging interests.

Children's interests often become the starting point for meaningful learning experiences.

For example:

A group of children notices snails in the garden.

Instead of moving on quickly, the teacher-researcher begins to investigate:

- What fascinates the children?
- What questions are they asking?
- How might this inquiry be extended?

A simple observation may grow into a long-term project.

Teachers as Co-Learners

Reggio-inspired teachers do not position themselves as the only experts.

Instead, they learn alongside children.

Being a co-learner means:

- Admitting when you do not know something.
- Investigating together.
- Asking questions.
- Exploring possibilities.

This creates a culture of inquiry and mutual respect.

Reflection

Think about a time when a child asked a question you could not answer.

How did you respond?

Did you provide an immediate answer?

Or did you explore the question together?

Sometimes the most powerful learning happens when adults do not rush to provide answers.

Collaboration Among Teachers

Research in Reggio-inspired settings is rarely done alone.

Teachers collaborate with colleagues to:

- Share observations

- Discuss documentation
- Analyse children's thinking
- Plan future experiences

Multiple perspectives often lead to deeper understanding.

Questions teachers might discuss include:

- What are we noticing?
- What patterns are emerging?
- What might the children be investigating?
- How can we extend the learning?

Practical Observation Strategies

Focus on One Child

Observe one child for 10 minutes without interruption.

Record only what you see and hear.

Focus on One Question

Observe how children solve problems during play.

Capture Children's Words

Record exact quotes rather than interpretations.

Use Photographs Purposefully

Take photos that show learning processes rather than only finished products.

Reflect Daily

Spend five minutes asking:

"What surprised me today?"

Common Challenges

Challenge 1

"I don't have time to document."

Remember:

Documentation does not need to be lengthy.

A photograph and a short note can provide valuable insight.

Challenge 2

"I don't know what to observe."

Start with children's interests, conversations, and interactions.

Curiosity will guide you.

Challenge 3

"I feel I need to have all the answers."

You do not.

A teacher-researcher values questions as much as answers.

Reflection Activity

Think about a recent classroom experience.

Describe:

1. What happened?
2. What did the children say?
3. What might they have been thinking?
4. What interests emerged?
5. How could you extend the learning?

Use this reflection as the beginning of your own teacher research journey.

Case Study

Scenario

During outdoor play, several children become fascinated by shadows.

They begin chasing them, comparing sizes, and noticing changes throughout the day.

A teacher focused only on supervision may overlook this.

A teacher-researcher might ask:

- Why are the children interested in shadows?
- What theories are they developing?
- How can this inquiry continue?

Possible extensions include:

- Shadow tracing
- Light investigations
- Shadow puppets
- Measuring shadow lengths
- Storytelling with shadows

Research begins with noticing.

Key Takeaways

Remember:

- ✓ Teachers are researchers of children's learning.
- ✓ Observation is the foundation of understanding.
- ✓ Listening helps reveal children's thinking.
- ✓ Documentation makes learning visible.
- ✓ Reflection transforms observations into insights.
- ✓ Children's interests can guide meaningful learning experiences.
- ✓ Teachers and children learn together.
- ✓ Curiosity is as important for educators as it is for children.

Final Reflection

Before entering your classroom tomorrow, ask yourself:

"What might I discover if I observed more carefully and listened more deeply?"

The Reggio Emilia Approach reminds us that teaching is not simply about delivering knowledge.

It is about researching learning.

When teachers become researchers, they begin to see children differently.

They notice more.

They understand more.

And they create learning experiences that truly respond to children's ideas, interests, and potential.

"The most important thing about listening is being open to being changed by what you hear."

As a teacher-researcher, every day becomes an opportunity to learn.

Observation Challenge:

Spend 15 minutes observing one child or a small group during free play. Record only what you see and hear—avoid interpretations. Later, reflect on:

- What interests emerged?
- What theories might the children be developing?
- How could this observation influence future planning?