

What makes Reggio Emilia so special?

Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before.

(Malaguzzi in Edwards *et al.* 2011: 57)

The Reggio Emilia preschools have no predetermined curriculum; they carry out no tests on the children nor do they have to meet goals or targets. The teachers are not required to hold any undergraduate qualifications. And yet they are often described as offering the best provision for young children in the world. How has this come about?

Theory and practice

Malaguzzi read widely and was influenced by many of the theorists who contributed to the thinking of many Western countries – Bruner, Vygotsky, Piaget, Bronfenbrenner and Dewey, but also other theorists, some of whom are little known or not highly regarded here.

He was influenced by the philosophers *Frances and David Hawkins*, both of whom visited Reggio at least twice and worked abroad in many developed and developing countries. They were interested in children as competent and curious beings and in the importance of children being able to follow their own interests. David Hawkins drew a distinction between being able to mess about and making a mess. The important difference is that of intention. Children messing about actively and consciously engage in explorations and investigations; the teacher's role is then to closely observe, document, revisit, and interpret the work of the children, together with families, colleagues and the children themselves. You can see how close this is to what developed in Reggio Emilia.

David Hawkins described a project that he and his partner set up and what they, the adults, learned about children as the children 'messed about'. The project related to things that roll, and how and why:

As a faculty, we were seeking to better support the children's interest in rolling through our own investigations. We filled the room's shelves with recycled materials, adhesives, wire, ropes, measuring tapes, wood pieces, and cardboard, and we began to create cars. After building and field-testing many cars, we invited a small group of children to comment on our work. The children wondered why we built cars, many of which did not roll very far or very fast and others that did not roll at all. In their work, parallel to ours, the children were categorizing objects by their ability to roll fast and far, referred to by the children as 'rollability'. While the teachers were immediately immersed in the theme of transportation, the children taught us that the work was about the concepts inherent in rolling, such as velocity, acceleration, distance, time, and friction. The initial work on rolling has led to schoolwide investigations of incline, both existing and constructed, and of a related concept, chain reaction.

(Kluger-Bell, cited in Hall 2010)

Also influential was the work of *Serge Moscovici*, who looked at what was necessary for people, including small children, to be able to talk to one another in groups. He believed that they must have a system of shared understanding, in particular of concepts and ideas that are outside of 'common' understanding or that have particular meaning for that group. He called this *social representation*, where words become imbued with special meanings within particular social groups. In the example given by David Hawkins we can see how the group of children invited to join the science experiment in their classroom invented and adopted the word 'rollability'. We are all familiar with the language of lawyers, which is so impenetrable to outsiders, and increasingly to the languages of Twitter and other social media systems, which are impenetrable to those not part of this culture. So social representation can be defined as:

Systems of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; secondly, to enable communication to take place amongst members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.

(Moscovici 1973)

What is particularly significant about this is that meaning is created through a system of social negotiations rather than being a fixed and defined thing, and that its interpretation may well require an understanding of additional aspects of that social environment. When you come to read the chapter about the making of the theatre curtain you will find some examples of the

language the children appropriated for themselves – words like transformation and cell – where the words have become part of their vocabularies sometimes because one child has introduced a new word into the group (like cell) and sometimes because the word usage has arisen through interaction with an adult (like transformation)

Another person whose work influenced Malaguzzi was the Swiss psychologist *Gabriel Mugny*, who looked at the performance of individuals alone or in groups and found that performance was better in the latter, but only where there was an element of conflict. This is an interesting and potentially disturbing finding. However, on careful reading, it emerges that conflict in this instance means two or more individuals within a group disagreeing about exactly how to do something and having to resolve this conflict in some way. This can be said to be a cognitive conflict or a socio-cognitive conflict. Malaguzzi talks of Mugny's finding as *interpersonal cognitive constructions*.

Let us examine an example that shows how very young children, working collaboratively, can demonstrate disagreement (or have cognitive conflict) and learn from it:

Two groups of children – one of boys and the other of girls – have been working on a design for the curtain to be put in the theatre in Reggio Emilia. At the end of a long process only one design can be chosen and the children have to decide which. They argue for a long time, with the boys all agreeing that theirs is the best, whilst the girls fiercely defend theirs. When no conclusion is reached Leonardo suggests that they should let all the children in the class vote, but Giovanni says that this will not help because all the boys will vote for the boy's design and the girls for the girl's design. Finally Federica says, 'I'm about to change my mind. Let's do this: let's decide for theirs, let's vote for theirs.'

(Drawn on Vecchi 2002: 90–91)

It is interesting that Malaguzzi was also influenced by the English educationalist *Wilfred Carr's* ideas on the relationship between theory and practice. Carr turned his critical eye on the work of the so-called *reflective practitioner* and action research approaches that became popular during the late 1980s, as there was growing dissatisfaction with older and more traditional teaching approaches. These new approaches insisted on practice rather than theory. Carr was interested in exploring the idea that teaching, an essentially practical activity, had to start with theory, but argued that this was not necessarily the case. Malaguzzi took from this that too-early and too-heavy reliance on theory could damage the creativity and spontaneity that is possible where teachers trust their observations and instincts and use theory and their own experience to confirm. For him, the teacher became the researcher, the maker of theory.

Research

For Malaguzzi, the business of teachers and learners was to learn and re-learn together. In this way children are not shaped by experience, but shape it themselves. He believed that children's learning could be looked at in two ways. The first is the way they come into an activity and develop their own strategies and ways of thinking and taking action. The second is the way in which objects are transformed. I could not find examples to illustrate this, but here is a little vignette that seems to show young children exploring art and science in one tiny exchange.

Two 6-year-old girls come into the nursery where a piece of translucent white paper has been pasted onto the glass. The adult did this, having noticed the leaves casting shadows. So she did something in response to what she had noticed about the physical world and presumably to offer another way of looking at it.

This is how the discussion between the two girls went:

AGNESE It is a drawing made by little bits of sun.

CECILIA They seem to be tiny leaves of sun.

AGNESE It is the shadow of the leaves that is reflected.

CECILIA But is it a drawing by the sun or by the shadow?

AGNESE It is like a clock. I saw it also yesterday and the other day. When that drawing comes up [pointing to the signs on the translucent paper] it is time to go to lunch.

(Gandini in Edwards *et al.* 2011: 306)

It is a wonderful example of children looking, asking questions, making hypotheses, listening to one other and exploring art and science. But I am not sure if this is children coming into an activity or transforming objects. I think it is children raising questions, sharing ideas and discovering something about the physical world.

It may be true that adults and children learn differently and use different procedures, abide by different rules, develop different hypotheses and theories and follow different paths. If you go back to the 'rollability' project you will see something of these aspects.

The purpose of the research that teachers do, either on their own or with colleagues, is to develop and use strategies that will be useful to children's learning. They go from research into action or from action into research. It becomes a spiral process. You will find reference to the research that teachers have undertaken all the time, every day in their lives in the preschools, throughout this book. It is the very stuff of their working lives.

The effects of this are numerous. Teachers learn that they cannot expect or ask children to give back to them what they already know: they – the teachers – are always learning. Children come to be better known by their teachers.

This gives the children confidence to work with peers in unusual and sometimes difficult situations. They become more persistent in following their goals. They become able to make more and wider choices.

The preschools are set up so as to allow children the utmost flexibility in making choices. They can find places to be alone, or with a small group, or with a bigger group, with or without teachers, in the atelier, the mini atelier or the large piazza, or outside in good weather. Each classroom is then a large space full of what Malaguzzi called ‘market stalls’, each offering children a choice of their own projects or activities. Malaguzzi believes this way of setting up the space reflects the city in which they live, with its squares and porticoes and its gracious central square that sometimes becomes a real buzzing market. According to Bruner, this market acts in the same way as a what he called a forum:

A culture is as much a forum for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action as it is a set of rules or specifications for action. ... It is the forum aspect of a culture that gives its participants a role in constantly making and remaking the culture – an active role as participants rather than as a performing spectators who play out their canonical roles according to rule when the appropriate cue occurs.

(Bruner 1986: 123)

What is more, there is no planned curriculum and this, says Malaguzzi, is because that would push the schools towards teaching without learning. So the curriculum becomes a series of long-term and shorter projects. These may be planned by the teachers, but the ways in which the children respond is up to them. A project on designing a curtain for the theatre might become a project about transformation for one group of children, about cells for another, or about upside-down domes for a third. It is important to remember that in each school year the children build on what they have done before and, Malaguzzi believes, their experience gives them standing in the school community, so they are taken seriously, which enables the teachers to follow the children. He likes the word ‘reconnaissance’ and applies it to describing how the teachers use their experience in their meetings and discussions, exhibitions and workshops with colleagues, political figures, community members, children, advisory bodies, family members, visitors and others.

Let us look now at the roles of two pedagogical specialists within the system: the pedagogista and the atelierista. The role of pedagogista or pedagogical coordinator started in centres like Bologna, Modena, Parma and Pistoia in the mid-1970s, when a few municipalities began to open their own preschools. The role is deeply embedded in the Reggio system and the pedagogisti work on a collegiate basis, with their own group of scuole and nidi, but also in interactions with other working groups. At present (2012) there are 13 pedagogisti, 10 of whom coordinate the municipal provision

and each of whom work directly and intimately with four schools or centres. The other two have wider and more senior positions relating to the pedagogical work across the city.

The work of the pedagogisti is, in some ways, like that of advisory teachers in the UK. At the heart of their work is professional development and this, as you know, is an essential element of all teachers' work and delivered on a weekly basis. The pedagogisti are concerned to ensure that this can be offered in ways that are respectful of individual needs and preferences in terms of time and modality. So they attempt to arrange meetings that may be separate and specialist, but also joint. The pedagogisti say that, as professionals, they aim to use theory to back up practice and, since their work is very complex, they are in regular and constant contact with a range of stakeholders. When explaining something to a group of parents, for example, pedagogisti may need to be able to offer pedagogical reasons, together with political and budgetary constraints, in explanation. They are very much encouraged in their roles by the ongoing support of mayors over three generations of children.

The word *atelierista* is sometimes translated as studio teacher, but in essence the *atelierista* is something for which there is no English equivalent. The *atelier*, a French word for studio, is a workshop or laboratory at the heart of every preschool and in that *atelier* is someone called the *atelierista*.

The *atelier* was established from the very start of the project, in 1963, at first in every *scuola dell'infanzia* that was built and later into every *asilo nido* as well. The presence of this dedicated space, together with the framework of learning and teaching strategies, was a deliberate retort to the marginal role that was, until then, assigned to expressive education. More than that, it was a reaction against the accepted forms of educating young children based on words and simple routines. Children were now regarded as competent, curious, questioning, creative and logical. This child – the new child – was entitled to a school made up of respect, relationships, listening and learning. Teachers, too, were entitled to a school made up of respect: relationships, teaching and learning. The *atelier* became a particular space, in Malaguzzi's words:

a space for digging with one's own hands and one's own mind, for refining one's own eyes, through the practice of the visual arts. It had to be a place for sensitizing one's taste and aesthetic sense, a place for the individual exploration of projects connected with experiences planned in the different classrooms of the school ... a place for researching motivations and theories of children from scribbles on up, a place for exploring variations in tools, techniques and materials with which to work ...

(Edwards *et al.* 2005: 7)

The *atelier* was then going to be a place of challenge and provocation. And for Malaguzzi, although his great plans were not fully realised, the *atelier* did

not disappoint. It was the place where children could use all their expressive languages and, as it happened, their mathematical, scientific and logical ones as well. It was, and still is, a place for research.

After his death, the old Locatelli Parmesan cheese storage facility was turned into the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre. Within it is a large atelier and, since 2006, this has hosted the *Raggio di Luce* or Ray of Light, a place for research, experimentation and immersion in an environment where light, in its various forms, can be investigated by means of explorations that provoke curiosity and wonder, and stimulate creativity and in-depth study. It is also a place of research related to science. Designed for both individuals and groups, there are specifically devised contexts, instruments and tools, all designed to make the exploration of light more apparent and spectacular. I visited it some years ago, sadly on a day when I was the only visitor in the centre, but the young atelierista, who had managed to get through the snow to work, showed me all the wonderful equipment together with the comments, questions and artwork of the children. Here again was evidence of children's abilities to take hold of a topic and pursue it in individual and different ways to come to some understanding.

In the first few years atelieristi were only to be found in the scuole dell'infanzia primarily for financial reasons, but also because there was a belief that the role needed to be redefined. Now, as there are more and more combined centres providing for children from birth to the age of 6, atelieristi are employed in them and in wider settings. These include the Documentation and Educational Research Centre, which was established to be a resource for highlighting and formally recognising the experience of the municipal infant-toddler centres and preschools, and of the local educational institutions in general. It provides opportunities for exchange and professional enrichment by promoting and supporting the now-accepted culture of documentation and educational research as an *integral part* of the professionalism of educators. The centre also collaborates with Reggio Children on the creation and management of exhibitions related to projects designed and carried out by the infant-toddler centres and preschools operated by the municipality of Reggio Emilia, as well as other schools on the local territory. The Gianni Rodari Theatre Laboratory and the Video Centre work in close collaboration with the Documentation Centre.

The role of the atelierista is complex and important, and Veà Vecchi has written an excellent book on the subject. At present, the role of the atelierista is seen to be that of providing a rich and invitingly open-to-questioning environment for the children, but also to be a researcher into both children's and adult's ways of knowing. Vecchi ascribes an additional role: that of providing not only the tools and techniques, but also the specific language and vocabulary involved in the creative arts. More of that is to be found in the *Raggio di Luce*, where the language being offered is scientific.

Looking back, looking ahead

In this chapter we have looked at Malaguzzi's thinking about the relationship between theory and practice, and have seen how he became convinced that theory without practice was empty and that all those working with children had to become active researchers. Research must be a joint process between the learners and the educators exploring and learning together. Collaboration, negotiation, respect, listening, sharing and relationships are all key to this joint process and it was enormously aided by the introduction of the studio/workshop, and later the laboratory in the provision.

In the next chapter we turn our attention to the importance of relationships to all learning. Malaguzzi's socio-cultural model could not exist in a world where children are seen as isolated individuals. They come, as he said, with pieces of the world attached.