

Dedicated to Loris Malaguzzi, The Town of Reggio Emilia and its Schools



I first visited Reggio more than a decade ago. But it is only during the last 6 years or so, after the death of Loris Malaguzzi (pictured left), that I have begun to gain some understanding of his work and the importance of the experience of Reggio Emilia and its schools. This relatively short collaboration has been invaluable. For the creative thinking and innovative practice that are the hallmark of Malaguzzi and Reggio have helped me to find a way out of problems that were proving perplexing. >>>

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>>> Throughout the 1990s, for example, the concept of quality and its measurement troubled me: how could quality accommodate subjectivity and values, context and multiple perspectives. The answer turned out to be that it could not. Subjectivity, values, context and multiple perspectives required another concept of evaluation, which might be termed meaning making; and a different sort of tool, pedagogical documentation. And where do you find meaning making and pedagogical documentation not just talked about but practiced? In the life of Loris Malaguzzi and the work of Reggio's municipal schools.

So Malaguzzi and Reggio helped me get beyond quality. And now they provide inspiration again. Gunilla Dahlberg and I have been working on a book which starts with a question. What would it mean were schools to be understood, first and foremost, as spaces or sites for political and ethical practice? The need to ask the question arises because schools today are so often conceptualised as, first and foremost, places of technical practice for promoting linear development and transmitting a defined body of knowledge: what Malaguzzi dismissed as a 'small pedagogy'.

We live at a time when, globally, unprecedented attention is paid to early childhood and to the development of services for young children and their families. This is welcome: but it also puts me in mind of Foucault's warning that while everything is not bad, everything is dangerous. This growing international interest in the young child brings opportunities, but it is also dangerous: it may lead to the child being more governed than ever before. For it seems to me that so much of today's discussion about early childhood, and indeed discussion about schools and other services for older children, is strongly influenced by a very particular way of thinking: that the application of the right technology to children from an early age will produce subjects who will meet the needs of neoliberal economies and advanced liberal societies, subjects who will be flexible workers, autonomous citizens and calculating consumers. A dominating discourse, inscribed with the disciplinary perspective of developmental psychology, tells us what the child should be; and an array of concepts and practices – quality, excellence, outcomes, developmentally appropriate practice to mention but a few – create a dense network of norms and the means to ensure conformity to these norms. In this way, schools become, first and foremost, places of technical practice and normalisation.

It is in this context that the thought and practice of Malaguzzi and the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia become so important. This thought and practice do not dismiss technical practices, they do not ignore matters of organisation and structure: but this thought and practice puts them in their place. Malaguzzi and Reggio insist that early childhood is first and foremost a matter of political and ethical practice: "we don't forget (says Carlina Rinaldi) that behind every solution and every organization, this means behind every school, there is a choice of values and ethics".

So for my contribution today I want to recognise and celebrate Loris Malaguzzi's contribution to this all-important, but too often neglected, political and ethical dimension. What can be more political than his question: what is your image of the child? Or Carlina Rinaldi when she says that "childhood does not exist, we create it as a society, as a public subject. It is a social, political and historical construction".

Malaguzzi was quite clear about Reggio's answer to his political question:

"One of our strengths has been to start out from a very clear, very open declaration of our ideas about the young child. It is a highly optimistic vision of the child: a child who possesses many resources at birth, and with an extraordinary potential which has never ceased to amaze us; a child with the independent means to build up its own thought processes, ideas, questions and attempts at answers; with a high level of ability in conversing with adults, the ability to observe things and to reconstruct them in their entirety. This is a gifted child, for whom we need a gifted teacher."

And as this quotation suggests, the politics of childhood includes other political questions. Who do we think the teacher is? And how do we understand institutions of childhood, such as the school? There is, again, no single right answer to such questions. They are highly contestable, they are the stuff of politics - and Reggio has made its political choices. The teacher, in Reggio, is not a technician, certainly not a substitute mother – both still powerful images elsewhere. She is a co-constructor of knowledge and values together with children; she is a cultured and curious person, which means an inveterate border crosser; and she is a researcher, with an enquiring and critical mind – and Malaguzzi bequeathed to Reggio a belief in the importance of research, not as a separate academic activity but as an integral part of everyday life.

The way we understand the school and other institutions for children is equally important. An understanding that is very strong today is the school as an enclosure where technologies can be applied to children to produce predetermined outcomes; the metaphor is the factory, predictability and conformity the main values. Another understanding, especially strong in the English language world, is the school as a business, competing in a market to sell commodities such as care and education to individual consumers.

Reggio offers a very different understanding. The school as a public space, a place of encounter, interaction and connection between citizens young and old, and which has many possibilities – some predetermined and predictable, but many others that are not, but which instead will surprise and amaze. Reggio, too, understands its schools as public institutions, not private commodities, in a close and open relationship with their local communities, foregrounding values of democracy, solidarity and hospitality.

Malaguzzi and Reggio have also provided us with a powerful tool for making schools spaces for the practice of democratic political practice: pedagogical documentation. This method for making pedagogical work visible and therefore subject to interpretation and critique welcomes difference and confrontation, multiple perspectives and divergent interpretations. Pedagogical documentation serves several purposes: evaluation, where evaluation is understood as a democratic process of meaning making rather than the managerial assessment of quality; learning about learning, through adopting a researching approach; and making the work of the school the subject of what Nikolas Rose calls ‘minor politics’, a politics “concerned with the here and now, not with some fantasized future”.

Alfredo Hoyuelos, Malaguzzi’s biographer, captures the political and ethical purpose of pedagogical documentation when he writes:

“Documenting is one of the keys to Malaguzzi’s philosophy. Behind the practice I believe is the ethical concept of a transparent school and transparent education...A political idea also emerges, which is what schools do must have public visibility: thus ‘giving back’ to the city what the city has invested in them.”

I cannot leave the theme of political practice without mentioning one other way in which Malaguzzi opens up for politics. For it seems to me that he engages in what has been termed a politics of epistemology. He contests modernity’s idea of knowledge as the objective representation of a real world, in favour of knowledge as socially constructed by each one of us in relation with others. Again I quote from Alfredo Hoyuelos:

“Malaguzzi’s pedagogy is complex: ‘it allows itself’ subjective, divergent and independent interpretations of the world in contrast with linear and accumulative progress. It takes a sceptical position on past, present and future certainties...Its credo is that the subject constructs – with others and in democracy – her or his own epistemology, her or his own way of seeing the world: in the conviction that this represents only a partial vision with an expectation of other possible ways of seeing.”

The spread of technical practice smothers the politics of epistemology. Malaguzzi and Reggio provide an oxygen supply, by insisting that the meaning of knowledge is contestable. And in their understanding of knowledge – as constructed, perspectival, provisional, rhizomatic – they also make into contestable and political issues concepts and tools that are today widely taken for granted as neutral and self-evident: curriculum, quality, outcomes, development.

If a school might be, first and foremost, a space for political and ethical practice, where do the ethics come in? And what ethics? In trying to understand what it might mean to conceptualise ethics as first practice in schools, Gunilla and I have had two sources of inspiration. First, the work of the Canadian Bill Readings. In his

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final book, the University in Ruins, Readings offers his vision of universities and other institutions for education and learning,

“as sites of obligation, as loci of ethical practices, rather than as sites for the transmission of scientific knowledge... The condition of pedagogical practice is ‘an infinite attention to the other’... (and) education is this drawing out of the otherness of thought... [It is] Listening to Thought... Doing justice to Thought, listening to our interlocutors, means trying to hear that which cannot be said but that which tries to make itself heard.”

There are two important concepts in what Readings says: the idea of schools as ‘loci of ethical practices’ and the idea of learning as ‘listening to thought’. And both connect, I think, to Malaguzzi and Reggio. For Readings’ idea of listening to thought has much in common with Reggio’s concept of a ‘pedagogy of listening’. And both, Gunilla and I would argue, are inscribed with a particular ethical approach: Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of the ethics of an encounter.

Levinas argues that there is a strong Western philosophical tradition that gives primacy to knowing. Through this will to know, we grasp the other and make the other into the same. An example is the concepts and classifications of developmental psychology, which give us as teachers or researchers possibilities to possess and ‘comprehend’ the child. Alterity disappears and singularity and novelty are excluded, to be replaced by ‘the totalitarianism of the same’.

Working with the ethics of an encounter requires the teacher (or indeed the researcher or policy maker), in Gunilla Dahlberg’s words, “to think an other whom I cannot grasp [which] is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy”. And Reggio’s ‘pedagogy of listening’ provides one way in which this important shift can be made. For a pedagogy of listening means listening to thought - the ideas and theories, questions and answers of children - treating thought seriously and with respect, struggling to make meaning from what is said, without preconceived ideas of what is correct or appropriate. ‘A pedagogy of listening’ involves an ethical relationship of openness to the Other, trying to listen to the Other from his or her own position and experience and not treating the other as the same. A ‘pedagogy of listening’ treats knowledge as constructed, perspectival and provisional, not the transmission of a body of knowledge which makes the Other into the same.

In writing our new book, Gunilla and I have found, once again, that Reggio was there first: through a politics of childhood and a pedagogy of listening, they have shown what it means to

make schools, first and foremost, sites for political and ethical practice. And so much of this flows from Malaguzzi’s thinking: the importance he attached to democratic relationships; his readiness to embrace different perspectives and uncertainty; his appreciation of the socially constructed, provisional and complex nature of knowledge, captured in his metaphor for knowledge as a ‘tangle of spaghetti’; his joy in making connections and border crossing; his openness to the unexpected and his relish for experimentation – all of which open up to a relationship of respect for the other and a desire to listen rather than grasp.

After 6 years of collaboration, what is my image of Reggio Emilia? Or rather images, as three come readily to mind. First, Reggio as a complex of workshops or laboratories, where children and adults are constantly experimenting, inventing and welcoming the new and unknown. Second, Reggio as an island of dissensus, a challenge to normalising tendencies in early childhood, a place that makes the familiar strange and forces us to question the taken-for-granted assumptions of dominant discourses. But not an isolated island, an island in the middle of the ocean; but part of an archipelago of islands sharing values and with frequent connections. Lastly, Reggio as an example of utopian thought and action, at a time when we increasingly find it difficult to imagine really different ways of thinking and doing.

The Portuguese social scientist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos speaks of the widespread disillusion and disenchantment in our world today, and a loss of hope in the future. We must, he argues, reinvent the future by opening up a new horizon of possibilities:

“Merely to criticize the dominant paradigm, though crucial, is not enough. We must also define the emergent paradigm, this being the really important and difficult task... The only route, it seems to me, is utopia. By utopia I mean the exploration by imagination of new modes of human possibility...and the confrontation by imagination of the necessity of whatever exists – just because it exists.”

I can think of no better definition of utopia, nor of the 40 years of work in Reggio that we are celebrating at this conference. And when I think of Malaguzzi in this context, I see him as an inventor, a dissenter and an explorer, but above all as a utopian thinker and actor who could imagine new modes of human possibility and had an unquenchable hope for the future.

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