

The global significance of a local  
cultural project  
or  
What impact might Reggio Emilia  
have on Early Childhood  
Education

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## My argument

- Early childhood education in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia:
  - is not an ‘approach’
  - it is an example of a variation on a long-established education tradition **and** a local cultural project of education
- ‘Reggio Emilia’ cannot be exported or copied – but it has global significance/impact for other reasons

## *‘Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia’*

- **Collaboration** between Working Group in RE, Jane McCall, Leverhulme Trust, Routledge & myself
- **Archive** of 400+ documents (RE Documentation and Educational Research Centre) → 102 documents selected by Working Group (in Italian)
- **Five chronological chapters**, from 1945, with introduction to each chapter about historical context and LM’s life + the selection of documents
- Published in ‘**Contesting Early Childhood**’ series

- Reggio Emilia is **not an ‘approach’** if that means it is an exportable model of education that can be reproduced universally

BECAUSE

- Early childhood education in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia has evolved in a **particular geographical, historical, political and cultural context**

## Geographical context

- Reggio Emilia lies in the Po Valley in Northern Italy...70 kms west of Bologna
- City of about 160,000 people
- Flat farming land with small and medium-sized industry...prosperous part of Italy

## Historical context

1871: Italy unified as a nation state

1920: Loris Malaguzzi born in Reggio Emilia

1923: Fascist dictatorship in Italy

1940: Italy enters WW2

1943: Nazi Occupation of northern Italy

1945: Reggio Emilia liberated at end of war

## Historical context

*“We asked what prompted the people of Reggio Emilia to design an early childhood education system founded on the perspective of the child. [Bonacci, Mayor of Reggio Emilia in the 1960s] replied that the **fascist experience had taught them** that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative to safeguard and communicate that lesson and nurture and maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves”*  
(Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013)

## Historical context

*“I remember these were times [after the Liberation] when **everything seemed possible**... At that time, after the war, after the grief, and after the ruins, there was a very strange phenomenon, impetuous and strong, it made possible a great longing, great fervour and great excitement. It was the ridiculous capacity of being able to think anything, and to think that anything could be physically realised”*  
(Loris Malaguzzi)



## Historical context

1950s/60s: Italy's economic miracle

1963: 1<sup>st</sup> RE municipal school for young children (3-6) / Malaguzzi as Consultant to schools, then Director

1960s: 'municipal school revolution'

1971: 1<sup>st</sup> municipal school for young children (0-3)

1984: Malaguzzi retires but remains active

1994: Malaguzzi dies...but municipal schools continue

## Political context

- Strong cooperative movement
- Heartland of Italian Communist Party...mass membership...governs RE for decades

*“I knew nothing about politics, of the October Revolution, of Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Togliatti. But I was sure I was taking the side of the weakest, of the people who carried most hope”* (Loris Malaguzzi)

## Cultural context

- strong civic and regional identity
- dialect still widely spoken after the war
- distinctive food and drink (Parmesan cheese)
- strong 'social capital'...participation in clubs etc, civic engagement

- Reggio Emilia **is an example of the long-established progressive tradition** in education, with 5 recurring themes:
  - criticism of traditional education
  - nature of knowledge
  - human nature
  - democracy
  - development of the whole person

- Reggio Emilia is a **local cultural project of education** that has evolved in a particular context
- That project has a distinctive identity, including...

# 1. Early childhood education is a political practice

*‘[Pedagogy is] always a **political discourse** whether we know it or not...it clearly means working with **political choices**’* (Malaguzzi, 1970s)

- **Political choices** are made in response to **political questions** that have alternative and often conflicting answers, such as ‘what is your image of the child’?

## 2. Making the political choice of understanding the child as a rich child

*“There are rich children and poor children. We [in Reggio Emilia] say **all children are rich, there are no poor children**. All children whatever their culture, whatever their lives are rich, better equipped, more talented, stronger and more intelligent than we can suppose”* (Loris Malaguzzi)

### 3. Adopting a social constructionist perspective to learning and knowledge

*“Learning does not take place by means of transmission or reproduction...It is a process of construction by the individual in relation with others, a true act of co-construction”* (Rinaldi, 2006)

- Pedagogy of relationships and listening



## 4. Strategy and projects, not programmes

- **Programme:** with its focus on premeditation and prediction, creates ‘caged-in’ experience, stifles creativity and originality, and leads to closure rather than keeping meaning open
- **Strategy:** *“a capacity for flexibility, a capacity for attention, reflection and for changing attitude... the capacity to deal with situations and problems by letting go of our old ways of putting things together”* (Loris Malaguzzi)

- **Project work:** *“flexible approach in which initial hypotheses are made about classroom work (as well as about staff development and relationships with parents), but are subject to modifications and changes of direction as the actual work progresses...[growing] in many directions without an overall ordering principle, challenging the mainstream idea of knowledge acquisition as a form of linear progression”*  
(Malaguzzi book)

## 5. Fundamental values

- Cooperation; uncertainty; subjectivity; research; experimentation; inter-connectedness; **democracy**

*“[The school must be capable of] **living out processes and issues of participation and democracy** in its inter-personal relations, in the procedures of its progettazione (project) and curriculum design, in the conception and examination of its work plans, and in operations of organisational updating” (Loris Malaguzzi)*

## 6. The theory of the 100 languages

- “the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems” (Vea Vecchi)
- “*CHILDREN HAVE A HUNDRED LANGUAGES: THEY ROB THEM OF NINETY NINE SCHOOL AND CULTURE*” (Loris Malaguzzi)

## 7. Distinctive language

'evolution'... 'wonder'... 'surprise'... 'joy'...

'pleasure'... 'subjectivity'... 'uncertainty'...

'unpredictability'... 'complexity'... 'interconnectedness'... 'culture'... 'experimentation'...

'holistic'... 'flow'... 'process'... 'ferment'...

'democracy'

- If we cannot export, reproduce or copy the early childhood education of the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia, what is its wider significance? What is its global impact?

Some personal reflections

# 1. Reggio Emilia shows the potentiality of progressive education

- Local project scaled up to whole school system and lasted over 60 years
- Made possible by:
  - supportive context
  - strong vision
  - great practicality → putting conditions in place

- fully integrated, education-based 0-6 early childhood service
- well educated, well paid teachers
- ateliers and *atelieristas*
- support systems, e.g. two teachers/group, collaborative working, *pedagogistas*
- attention to the environment
- democratic management and accountability
- adequate public funding



## 2. There are alternatives!

- At a time of increasing standardisation and a ‘dictatorship of no alternative’, Reggio Emilia shows that there are other ways of doing education

*“Challenging and deconstructing dominant discourses...having the courage to think for themselves in constructing new discourses... building a new pedagogical project”* (Dahlberg et al., 2013)

### 3. Education is first and foremost a political practice

- Technical practice – what to do? – is important, but comes ***after*** political practice and political choices – what do we want?

4. Reggio Emilia's political questions and choices are a provocation to thought
- What is *our* image of the child? Of the teacher? Of the early childhood centre? How do *we* understand knowledge and learning? What are *our* fundamental values? What is *our* 'diagnosis of the times'? What do we want for our children?

## 5. We need to make education relevant to our diagnosis of the times

*“Our conception of pedagogy is dynamic, not mummified. Either pedagogy is remade, reconstructed and updated **based on the new conditions of the times**, or it loses...its capacity to correspond to the times it lives in, and above all to foresee, anticipate and prepare the days of tomorrow”* (Malaguzzi, 1969)

How should education respond to the converging environmental crises?

## 6. Reggio Emilia offers us some important pedagogical tools, e.g.

- the procedure of pedagogical documentation
- the role of specialist staff such as *atelierista* and *pedagogista*
- **time** built into the working week to analyse, debate and reflect on pedagogical practice.

## In conclusion

The early childhood education in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia opens us to the possibility of conducting a democratic politics of education as the basis for co-constructing our own local cultural projects of education that combine desirable goals with the conditions to achieve them