



**Kathy Hall, Mary Horgan, Anna Ridgway, Rosaleen Murphy, Maura Cunnene, Denice Cunningham.** *Loris Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia Experience.* Continuum Library of Educational Thought Series. London: Continuum, 2010. xiii + 191 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84706-105-8.

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## Theory and Practice in the Reggio Emilia Experience

The city of Reggio Emilia's infant-toddler and preschool childcare system has generated international attention: in 1991, *Newsweek* named it the best in the world; dozens of study tours of the town have been organized; its "Hundred Languages of Children" exhibition has traveled the globe; and a company called Reggio Children has been created to produce and disseminate information on the so-called Reggio Experience—all of this in spite of the fact that Reggio practitioners insist that early childhood education emerges from specific sociohistorical and cultural contexts and that it is, therefore, impossible to entirely transplant the Reggio model to other cultures. Yet educators, early childhood researchers, and policymakers nonetheless want more information on the city's preschools. Kathy Hall, Mary Horgan, Anna Ridgway, Rosaleen Murphy, Maura Cunnene, and Denice Cunningham's *Loris Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia Experience* sets out to share a critical account of the "ideas, ideologies, assumptions, principles, theories—explicit and implicit—underlying Reggio thinking and practices" and to "provide the reader with an accessible and authoritative account of the Reggio Emilia Experience" (pp. 1, 3).

The volume is divided into three parts, the first of which situates the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy in its historical and intellectual contexts. This background information is not always directly related to the

subject at hand, however. For example, educated readers will be familiar with the basic tenets of socialism, communism, and fascism, so any discussion of these ideologies should focus on their direct implementation in, and effect on, Italy's administrative region of Emilia Romagna and the city of Reggio Emilia. Likewise, the section "Educational and Historical Developments in Italy" is too broad in scope to be of real use in situating contemporary early childhood education in one northern Italian town—it moves from Quintilian to the twenty-first century in the space of five pages, and, as a result, the analysis it contains is superficial; a simple timeline might have conveyed the same information more effectively. Finally, the comparison with Red Vienna seems unnecessary if its only purpose is to draw the rather flimsy conclusion that early childhood education in interwar Vienna was similar but different to early childhood education in post-World War II Reggio Emilia, even though both movements were reacting to ultra-right-wing, church-supported political ideologies.

Part 2, "Critical Exposition of the Reggio Emilia Experience," is the heart of the book and is divided into four chapters: "Principles into Practice," "Partnership with Parents and Families," "Curriculum: Ideology and Pedagogy in Reggio Emilia," and "A Discursive Analysis of Reggio Emilia." Of these four chapters, chapter 2, "Principles into Practice," is, without a doubt, the

weakest. Although it provides a helpful breakdown of the functions of the different educators to be found in Reggio *nidi* (infant-toddler centers) and preschools (*atelierista* [artist], *pedagogista* [curriculum specialists], and two teachers per class) and also of the ongoing project that forms the core of the research that students and teachers carry out, it contains too many abstractions for readers to get a clear sense of how the schools operate on a day-to-day basis. This is particularly true of the section "What Does a Reggio Emilia Preschool Look Like?" which contains subjective and highly repetitive assertions that the schools, classrooms, materials, and artwork are "very attractive," "almost attractive," "aesthetically pleasing," "appealing and aesthetic," "artistically and attractively arranged," and "very inviting"; that there is a lot of "attention to detail"; that the dining areas have "attractive tablecloths"; and that a shelf in one dining area contained "some lovely green plants and an apple, cut in sections, attractively arranged" (pp. 39-43).

The strengths of the Reggio Emilia philosophy come to light in the chapter dealing with family and parental participation in the preschools. The "dynamic relationship" between parents, families, and the schools is one of the most distinctive features of the Reggio Experience, and Hall and her coauthors discuss this in relation to *inserimento* (the prolonged process of transitioning children into the schools), *partecipazione* (the extensive and meaningful partnerships with parents), and *gestione sociale* (the way in which the preschools are governed by the community) (p. 78). The discussion highlights how Reggio is not so much about individual children's learning experiences but about early childhood education as a community responsibility. Given the extent to which the schools depend on the "process of dialogue and debate" between teachers and parents (and children), it would be worthwhile to delve deeper into the constraints that this *modus operandi* places on those involved and the difficulties that the "philosophy of democracy and citizen participation" poses to the management of the schools and the execution of the curriculum (pp. 73, 75).

The analysis of the Reggio curriculum in chapter 4 examines how its "progressive, child-centered/emancipatory ideology" is distinct from classical and utilitarian conceptions of education in which the primary function of schooling is to transmit knowledge (p. 94). Reggio preschools have no preestablished curriculum as such. They proceed by means of *progettazione*, a concept that "conveys a complex network of hypotheses, observations, predictions, interpretations, planning and exploration. It refers to the process of

adult thought, reflection and dialogue that precedes the development of a project as teachers try to anticipate all the possible ways the activity could develop based on the likely ideas and choices of the children" (p. 104). This is a complex and timeconsuming undertaking, made possible only by the fact that an ethos of collaboration underpins the entire Reggio Emilia philosophy and that teachers are expected to be "reflective practitioner[s]" (p. 109). Although it would be useful to have a few more examples of *progettazione* in action, the real merit of this chapter lies in its account of the theories behind Reggio practice. The authors make use of Malaguzzi's writings; build a convincing case for the influence—both direct and indirect—of thinkers like L. S. Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Jürgen Habermas; discuss how Reggio draws on both social constructivist and social constructionist ideas; and dissect the thorny notion of community in the Reggio Experience.

Chapter 5, "A Discursive Analysis of Reggio Emilia," truly critiques the Reggio Emilia Experience: it asks (without always answering) key practical questions about conflict, power struggles, "resources, planning, staffing, [and] time"; it highlights aspects of Reggio that are sidelined in other studies (e.g., issues of gender, ethnicity, special needs, and inclusion); and it provides detailed analysis of some of the contradictory and often opaque statements made about the movement (p. 136). The discursive analysis also exposes how many (if not most) writings about Reggio depend almost entirely on negative binary positioning to build their case: these binaries paint an idealized, romanticized portrait of the Reggio Emilia Experience that contrasts with the ineffective early childhood educational systems presumed to be in existence elsewhere. Lastly, the analysis shows how these writings typically avoid issues that would problematize or concretize their pro-Reggio rhetoric.

Hall and her colleagues have set themselves challenging aims, and they are not always successfully fulfilled. The book suffers from structural problems, including repetition (e.g., two sections on documentation of learning) and an uneven tone (e.g., impressionistic observations in chapter 2 versus theoretical analyses elsewhere). These weaknesses no doubt stem from the difficult business of having six authors—all from University College Cork's Early Childhood team—cowrite one text. Furthermore, the title is a misnomer: the book is not about Malaguzzi or his thinking. There are only three pages explicitly dealing with Malaguzzi's role in the history of the Reggio Experience in Part 1, and the introduction makes it clear that the authors are "not writing about the life and

work of one particular educator or writerâ (p. 3). While the authors acknowledge that Malaguzzi was a âkey architectâ of Reggio, their analysis is informed as much, if not more, by the writings of Carlina Rinaldi, another Reggio educator, as well as by the work of other educational practitioners, theorists, and researchers, including Maria Montessori and Howard Gardner (p. 1). There is nothing wrong with this approach—indeed, it makes sense, since the writings of these thinkers seem to be less esoteric than Malaguzzi’s—but it is unclear why the title emphasizes the work of one scholar when so many others—particularly the women of Reggio Emilia, to whose memory the book is dedicated—participated in the development of this grassroots, community-centered educational

movement.

Regardless of these shortcomings, the volume has clear merits: chapters 3 and 4 contain useful explanations of both the role of parental participation and the Reggio curriculum, and chapter 5 raises very important questions about how Reggio is imagined and theorized from within (by Reggio educators and parents) as well as about how critics analyze it. The volume closes with a chapter on issues of âquality,â which includes an analysis of teacher training, financial investment, and (again) children and parents as Reggio partners. It is a fitting end, as it illustrates the extent to which current conceptions of quality early childhood education seem to be synonymous with the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

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