Fostering Inclusion in Education

Alternative Approaches to Progressive Educational Practices

Edited by
Enrico Postiglione

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The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. An Analysis to Its Inclusive Perspectives and Their Relationships to Aesthetic Aspects

Lorenzo Manera

7.1 The Key Elements of the Reggio Emilia Approach

The educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia, known as Reggio Emilia Approach, is internationally considered as one of the most relevant educational perspectives in early childhood education (Fleer & van Oers, 2018; Edwards & Gandini, 2018).[1]

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[1] In the International Handbook of Early Childhood Education (2018), the Reggio Emilia Approach is mentioned as of the most relevant educational approaches to early childhood, together with Fröbel, HighScope, Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), Waldorf kindergarten and Montessori (Pramling & Samuelsson, 2018, p. 1311).

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In the Reggio Emilia Approach, the practical work of teachers refers to an interpretative theory that integrates research stories with real-life contexts. Practice is not only a field of action but also an active part of the theory itself: it both generates the theory and is generated by it. Furthermore, the educational philosophy of Reggio does not provide a single operational methodology: rather it is a structure, a constantly evolving paradigm that is closely linked to the contexts in which it takes place. Within this paradigm, the inclusive dimension plays a relevant role.

In order to better understand how the inclusive dimension is conceptualized, it is possible to identify the main aspects that define the approach of Reggio, in particular with regard to learning contexts, critical competences and work strategies. Fernández-Santín and Feliu-Torruella (2020) examined the key elements of the Reggio Emilia Approach through an integrative review of the most relevant international literature.

The core areas or axes that emerged from the literature review are (1) the environment as a third teacher, meaning that learning environments "take on the role of one of the main and necessary educators" (Cavallini et al., 2017). (2) The extension of the term "language" to the different ways that children use to represent, communicate and express their thoughts through the different media and symbolic systems. (3) Long-term projects, related to children's interests and to their exploration and to the questions they develop about the world that surrounds. (4) The teacher-researcher, meaning that teachers are intended as researchers who document their work and children's learning processes. (5) The image of the "competent" child, meaning the idea that children are able to construct complex communications and interactions thanks to a plurality of languages. As we will underline in the next paragraphs, this aspect of the Reggio Educational Philosophy has important consequences for conceptualization of the inclusive pedagogical aspects. (6) Negotiated learning, meaning the process of ideas and theories negotiation that allows children to co-construct their learning through social interaction. (7) Pedagogical documentation, which includes the notes and images that teachers use to make visible children's learning processes as they take place. Documentation is aimed at exploring the strategies implemented by children in order to elaborate the following educational paths by taking into consideration the hints shared by children. (8) Social relations, meaning the idea that children build knowledge from their relationships with teachers and peers through forms of cooperation.

By comparing the results of the integrative literature review conducted with the key values that constitute the Reggio Emilia Approach, it is possible to add some further aspects, including the ones that are most related to an inclusive perspective. (9) Progettazione (design), meaning the design process that applies to the didactics, the learning environments, the professional growth of the teachers, as opposed to the idea of applying predefined didactic programs. (10) Evaluation, intended as a collective process that structures the educational project, understood as a public act of dialogue and interpretation. (11) Participation, "which informs the culture of solidarity, responsibility, and inclusion by valorizing the hundred languages of children".[2] As we can notice, the culture of participation is intertwined with the culture of inclusion that characterizes the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Within the research project "Cluster. Educating city",[3] promoted by the Reggio Children Foundation, the main aspects that characterize the learning environments in the Reggio Emilia Approach have been further discussed and defined within a framework that includes three main aspects: learning contexts, critical competence and work strategies. As for the learning contexts, knowledge is considered as the result of a cognitive construction by an aware subject, and learning environments are aimed at creating relationships between learners and learning objects. Learning contexts allow children time to explore, formulate problems and then try to resolve them individually or with others. Research contexts foster a wide variety of perceptions (visual, sound, tactile), images, mental representations, metaphors and relationships.[4]

With regard to the critical competences, the Reggio Emilia Approach is characterized by the fact that the meaning of experiences is promoted through group reflection. Furthermore, the original thinking processes of children are encouraged in order to elaborate initial interpretative hypotheses about the phenomena observed and relate their thoughts to those of others. Children's ability to structure their thinking is supported to allow them to communicate it to others, to support their ideas and to link different registers of representation.

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[2] Available at https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/valori-en/.
[3] https://www.frchildren.org/en/research/projects/cluster-educating-city.
[4] To deepen the relationship between metaphorical learning processes and the Reggio Emilia Approach, please refer to Contini (2018).

As for the work strategies, the main characteristics are the facilitation of creative learning processes, comparison, evaluation and self-evaluation. Furthermore, children's learning processes are documented, and the documentation process is considered as a learning context. In particular, learning contexts tend to offer children and adults the possibility to ask questions and formulate and test hypotheses. Finally, opportunities are created for reflection, for carrying out surveys and re-elaborating the knowledge acquired, thus activating knowledge prior to new phases of research.

7.2   THE INCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE IN THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH

In order to further define the roots of the inclusive perspectives in the Reggio Emilia Approach, it is possible to refer to Carla Rinaldi's analysis of the most relevant protagonists of this educational experience. Rinaldi (2020)[5] mentions (1) the Municipal Administration of Reggio Emilia, that allowed the creation of a city-run system of infant-toddler centres and preschools. (2) The women's movements such as UDI (Unione Donne Italiane), that contributed to the development of democratic popular preschools.[6] (3) The many teachers, pedagogists and citizens who contributed to the educational experience of the City.[7] (4) Loris Malaguzzi, a progressive pedagogist who fostered the development of democratic educational experiences, whose relevance in the development and evolution of the Reggio Emilia Approach is internationally recognized.[8]

An aspect not yet explored in the scientific literature in relation to the topic of the inclusive perspectives of the Reggio Emilia Approach regards the role that Malaguzzi's 19 years of experience as co-administrator of the Municipal Psycho-Pedagogical Medical Centre in Reggio Emilia played in the development of an inclusive pedagogical model that included the use

[5] President of the Reggio Children Foundation (Fondazione Reggio Children – Centro Loris Malaguzzi).

[6] For an historical analysis of the role played by women movements in the development of the Reggio Emilia Approach, please refer to Lingenauber (2017).

[7] For an historical perspective on the collective development of the Reggio Emilia educational experience, please refer to Baldini et al. (2012).

[8] For a complex and detailed analysis of Loris Malaguzzi's pedagogical view and his role in the development of the educational experience of Reggio Emilia, please refer to Cagliari (2019).

of artistic languages as means to foster children's development and social inclusion. At the Pedagogical Medical Center, which Malaguzzi considered as an institution aimed at fostering the development of society (Malaguzzi, 1951), he studied drawings made by children aged 4 to 10. Influenced by the theories of the German psychologist Charlotte Bühler, he developed the conviction that the evolution of their drawings corresponded to a broader linguistic, cognitive and social process of development. In 1953, Malaguzzi stated in fact that the correspondence between drawing competence and intellectual development should lead to a significant reconsideration of "the traditional problems and methods of teaching art, just as in a broader sense it shifts the entire, integral issue of education" (Malaguzzi, 1953, p. 43). Furthermore, Malaguzzi's friendship and direct collaboration with several exponents of the Italian Neo Avant-garde movement,[9] together with the growing interest in the democratic educational perspectives and the aesthetic reflections developed by John Dewey (1980), contributed to define some of the main instances that characterize the central role assigned to visual arts intended as an instrument that allows considering reality with a different eye, exploiting connections and relation not yet explored. In fact, Dewey's aesthetic perspective, which binds meaning to the interactive nexus with the environment and conceives the relationship between the environment and the human organism and in a pluralistic sense (Matteucci, 2021), reinforced in Malaguzzi the concept of an educational environment opened to plurality and diversity.

In 1963,[10] Malaguzzi became a consultant for the Reggio Emilia's Municipal preschools, and then served as director of the early childhood educational services (which would later become Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres—Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia) from 1970 to 1986. In 1971, the Italian Parliament passed a law concerning educational rights for children with disabilities and established the right to a desegregated education of children in public schools (Smith, 1998). As argued by Ivana Soncini, the former responsible for the children with special rights[11] who are enrolled in the municipal preprimary schools and infant-toddler centres of Reggio Emilia, "inclusion began to occur in the

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[9] For a critical analysis of the collaboration and relationship between Malaguzzi and the exponents of the neo avant-garde movement, please refer to Hoyuelos Planillo (2004).

[10] The first Municipal preschool "Robison Crusoe" was inaugurated the same year (1963). The first Municipal toddler center "Genoveffa Cervi" opened in 1971.

[11] Expression used in the Reggio Emilia instead of children with special educational needs.

preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia before it was decreed by the 1971 national law" (Smith, 1998, p. 201), with the aim to go beyond the description of deficits, looking instead at the child's preferred strategies for learning.

7.3   THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH INCLUSIVE MODEL

More recently, Soncini (2009) developed an analysis of the central elements of the inclusive perspective that characterize the infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia, where children with special rights are ensured priority access.[12]

In her analysis, Soncini defined four main elements. Firstly, the political context as the roots of the inclusion of children with special rights are set within a specific historical context. According to her analysis, in the late sixties, the need to revise the concept of "psychic distress" and to redefine it in inter-personal, non-segregating terms, influenced the development of an inclusive perspective that shifted the focus on the characteristics, values and conceptions of "special rights" children.

Secondly, a pedagogical approach that welcomed the idea of allowing all children to have access to the same schools stemmed from a clear educational perspective. Such perspective was based on the idea that all children had the right to live in a school that, by valuing all subjectivities and all differences, allows children to build inter-subjectively their own constantly evolving knowledge and a positive image of themselves. Secondly, the organizational characteristics, meaning the fact that each classroom of the preschool has no more than one child with special rights, in order to allow him/her to get the best out of his/her encounters with the other children and adults.

Thirdly, the practice of documentation is fundamental for the relationships with the families and parents who have to cope with the effects of the child's difficulties. Providing special rights to children with a different kind of visibility in a social context opens the way towards interpretations that can create new equilibriums in the daily lives of the families, contributing to develop the identities within a system of relationships, within a dialectic of reciprocal recognitions. Finally, the idea of welcoming diversity

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[12] Charter of Services of the Reggio Emilia Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools (2017).

as a new source of information can broaden the scope of interaction, thereby stimulating the emergence of new working hypotheses and the use of open communication methods that are in line with the complexity of each individual.

7.4 Difference as Generative Dimension

A further element that defines the inclusive perspective in the Reggio Emilia Approach is the concept of diversity, intended both as an opportunity to break down the routinised forms of understanding reality and to explore new possibilities of understanding the world. Malaguzzi developed this concept also by drawing on Viktor Shklovsky's theories. In Shklovsky, 1917, Shklovsky published the essay "Art as Device", where he first proposed the neologism ostranenie (estrangement), which suggests distancing, dislocation and something becoming strange. The concept of estrangement refers, in fact, to a device that breaks up the routinized forms of perception, a displacement from what a certain element appears with respect to how it appears because of an estranging detail (Chernavin & Yampolskaya, 2019). Looking back at his most famous essay "Art as Device" (Shklovsky, 1990), first published in 1917, Shklovsky confirmed his conception of estrangement as an exercise of wonder, of thinking of the world as a question (Boym, 2017). In one of his reflections on the role of the Atelier, a space dedicated to children's aesthetic education, Malaguzzi referred to Shklovsky's idea of art being a process that removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways (Malaguzzi, 1988). In the interview, he also declared that children's aesthetic education should be a form of escape from rhetoric and stereotypes. Furthermore, Malaguzzi's view on the role of art in children's education was interpreted as an opportunity to contrast "the boredom of habit and the rejection of the mundane, intended as necessary aesthetic requirements" (Artioli, 2001, p. 206). This openness to diversity, to divergence, has had a relevant impact on the ability to open up about inclusion. Gilman (2007) underlined how, in the Reggio Emilia Approach, the attitude of openness to diversity, promoted as well through the exploration of artistic languages, plays an important role in creating an environment where participation and communication are encouraged. Furthermore, Vakil et al. (2003) underlined how the inclusive perspective that defines the Reggio Emilia Approach fosters a holistic view of the child, who develops an understanding of the world within social interaction context. Finally, as underlined by

Runswick-Cole and Hodge (2009), the Reggio Emilia Approach-inclusive perspective stresses the value and strengths of differences, celebrating the breadth of learning styles.

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