

THE REGGIO EMILIA CONCEPT OR DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN KINDERGARTENS

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Abstract: *There are numerous principles and concepts on the subject of education in young children, each with their own principles and starting points. One of the new alternative, postmodern concepts is the Reggio Emilia concept. It developed in Reggio Emilia (North Italy), from where it has expanded in numerous European countries and North America. The Reggio Emilia concept is a modern pre-school concept, the goal being to educate children into critical thinkers and guardians of democracy. It is based on human and children`s rights, democratic values and the rule of law, and it argues for conceptual integration of different sciences. What makes the Reggio Emilia philosophy distinct is that it is based on viewing childhood like a socially formed concept and in accordance with that, the children and teachers are co-founders of knowledge and society.*

Keywords: *postmodern concept, pre-school child, children`s rights, democratic worth.*

Preface

The Reggio Emilia pedagogy have been developing for four decades in the Emilia landscape in Northern Italy and it is based on the child`s image as a whole person, as a part of society, in co-relation (Dyrfjord 2006). Based on Dyrfjord`s comprehension, the child is competent and he has huge creative capabilities as well as the power for investigating the world that surrounds him.

Malaguzzi has made the Reggio Emilia ideology an important and influential concept.

Let`s have a look at the quotation that shows how much Malaguzzi recognizes the child`s individuality, and that this is the ethical obligation of pre-school pedagogy:

"The relationship is the primary linking dimension of our system. We are

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searching ways to support those social exchange that are assuring better flow of expectations, conflicts, cooperation, choice ... Among the goals of our study is also to strengthen the child`s sense of its own identity through the recognition possible by coeval and the adult to a degree that everyone can feel a sufficient sense of appurtenance and self-reliance to be a part of pre-care activities. This is the way to assure the children the expansion of communicative nets as well as master and respect the language on all the levels and its contextual usages." (Kroflič, n.d., p. 2).

At the heart of this system is the powerful image of the preschool child. They pay a lot of attention to the development of the child`s personality and the richness of their knowledge. They see children as full of potential, competent and capable of building their own future (Kreft, n.d.). Kindergartens often stresses that the role of the family is irreplaceable and the kindergarten has to stimulate the child to grow along with the family. Values are also important: among the most important are good cohabitation and collaboration between children (Padovan, n.d.).

The *Reggio Emilia Approach* is less structured than other concepts. They don`t have a formal (written) curriculum. It works with team collaboration. Rinald says that planning of the so called "fluid curriculum" in the Reggio Emilia concept captures only the planning of general goals, but not the specific goals of certain projects or activities (Dolar Bahovec and Bregar Golobič, 2004).

Crucial features of this approach include:

- Focus on planning such an environment to suit the needs of children.
- To recognize the meaning of relations between parents, teachers and children.
- To develop active educational process mostly based on "child`s own activity".
 - Educating and training teachers.
 - Children`s rights are the most important in those relations.
 - Concept of repetition and "negotiable" curriculum (Ferbežer, 2006).

The Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Approach is a complex system that respects and puts into practice many of the fundamental aspects of the work of John Dewey. He has influenced the western education. He has written a lot about education and democracy (Dyrfjord, 2006).

Table 1: comparison of Dewey`s and Reggio Emilia`s prospective

CONCEPT	DEWEY	REGGIO EMILIA
CHILD`S IMAGE	A child is a former of its own senses – an individual As a whole being.	A child is capable and predicts its own life. Is part of a society. As a whole being.
ORIGIN	Social democracy.	It origins from socialism .
TEACHER`S ROLE	The definition of the environment and organizing the opportunities for learning.	Co-former of the knowledge and syllabus. Environment is the third teacher.
SYLLABUS	It is open and formed in accordance with experiences and activities.	Chaotic, in progress and open. It begins on the basis of the questions and child`s experiences (PD).
SOCIALLY CULTURAL CONCEPT	Important.	Important.
SOCIAL ROLE	Important.	Important.
CHILD`S OWN CULTURE		Important.
CONTROVERSIAL QUESTIONS	Plausible.	Partly plausible – in certain spheres (blindness for sex).
CITIZENSHIP	A child is formatting as a citizen.	A child is formatting as a citizen.
RESPONSIBILLITY		Evaluation in the form of documenting.
ACCESS		The role of the society is to make the access possible to everyone, which is partly paid through taxes.

In 1968, the city Reggio Emilia, took over the administration and financing and children from local government of children aged three to five so that they were entitled to preschool education. People there have contributed a lot to the understanding and meaning of quality preschool education. They were among the first ones who decided to organise day care for children. Parents did not want schools like they had known. Instead they wanted their children to develop critical thinking and to evolve into adults with strong sense of democracy. The Reggio preschools started in 1963, even before the first public preschool (Kreft, n.d.). Loris Malaguzzi was to provide dynamic leadership to the movement in the Reggio commune, and he was a hero of their ideas (Dyrfjord, 2006). Since 1983, the interest for this concept has increased, especially, when children from the Reggio Emilia town presented their work (paintings, drawings, statues, models, photographs and different projects) at the Stockholm exhibition. The children's work caught the public's imagination and the exhibition then went round the world.

Methodology

This contribution is based on the descriptive method of the non-experimental pedagogical research. We used the classification method, descriptive method and historical method.

It was Loris Malaguzzi who became the inspiration behind the educational experiences in Reggio Emilia preschools, and in 1963 founded the first non-catholic preschool in Italy. Malaguzzi joined forces with the parents of this region who wanted to provide a high quality child care for young children without discriminating anyone. They succeeded after eight months of volunteering. When parents found out that Malaguzzi was a teacher, they invited him to join. Here he realized how important the connection with parents is and they developed a real friendship. Decades after the war, new ideas and strategies started taking hold as a result of a rapid social change. Because Italy is a Catholic country, the first schools were an alternative to the strait-laced, church-monopolized institutions that dominated Italian early education at the time. Preschools had been the responsibility of the Catholic Church and now more parents were demanding secular education for their children. However, the Church was afraid of losing the monopoly over education. After many years, preschools finally came under city authority. Nowadays in Italy, parents can choose between three types of preschools: state, municipal (Reggio model) and private (church) (Plestenjak, 1995).

“After leaving his post teaching in the public schools for seven years, Malaguzzi studied psychology in Rome. When he returned to his birth place, he founded a mental-health centre for children with special needs, and during afternoons and evenings he worked with teachers at preschools. Together with them he realized that many of those children were in a really bad shape, undernourished and that they spoke with a strong dialect. The idea was that they would have to collaborate with parents if they want to help those children. It was hard at first, though gradually parents came to the conclusion that they can learn about their children only from children themselves, which has become the leading principle, used for planning the first preschool” (Plestenjak, 1995, p. 169).

First preschool wanted to be without any form of discrimination. Because such a preschool was a novelty, they had some problems getting enough children at first. They had to quickly gain the trust and respect of the community. Once a week they decided to work on public presentations to show off different work and did different activities in town, at parks, markets etc. The children were happy and people were surprised. The first projects were Pinocchio and Robinson Crusoe – they built a ship, an island, the sea, a cave and tools with their drawing, painting and molding skills (Plestenjak, 1995).

Some years later Malaguzzi visited the Rousseau Institute and Piaget school for small children in Geneva. Piaget was a huge influence on him. He realized that it is not difficult for a child, who is the source and creator of their own experiences of everyday life, and this is why it is not difficult for them to gain a more abstract view of numbers, shapes and dimensions etc. For Malaguzzi, the fact that Italy was isolated during the Second World War was very disturbing and when he began to overcome this in the 60's, when they started to recognize the works of J. Dewey, H. Wallon, A. Makarenko, L. Vygotsky, E. Ericson, U. Bronfenbrenner, A. Freinet and J. Piaget, and other literature from W. Carre, J. Kagane, H. Gardner, R. Spitz and J. Bowlby have directed and inspired him for new ideas (Plestenjak, 1995).

“Increased knowledge has made it possible for Malaguzzi to courageously and individually form the modern concept as well as a good justification for much opposition from the other side, because he was an expert on different psychological theories and was acquainted with the results of foreign researches. He developed the preschool institution model, which has been observed by theorists and practitioners from around the globe in recent years. Attendance has to be booked no less than

a year in advance, but over time they had to stop this system because it was disturbing the life of the children and teachers" (Plestenjak, 1995, p. 170).

The Reggio model was ranked as the best and the most advanced preschool institution at the global competition (in 1983 as mentioned before) which was carried out by American weekly paper Newsweek. Loris Malaguzzi, founder and professor, who truly deserved his recognition and reputation, passed away on the 30th of January 1994 (Plestenjak, 1995).

This concept does not lean on any specific theory. Malaguzzi has said that they have found sources in many different theories. Key features of his approach include:

- active preschool involvement in the wider society,
- preschool influences on the development of child's identity,
- to use all senses in the process of learning
- preschool encourages and enables different ways of expression,
- learning is prior to the teaching,
- quality interaction and communication.

Research Hypothesis

Within the research framework we have made the next hypothesis:

The Reggio Emilia preschool is connected with the environmental culture.

The Reggio Emilia preschool influences the development of the child's identity.

The Reggio Emilia preschool stresses the development and usage of all senses in the learning process.

The Reggio Emilia preschool prefers learning over teaching.

The Reggio Emilia preschool finds quality and interaction important.

Results and interpretation

Preschool is connected with the environmental culture

Malaguzzi finds preschool as an area, where culture is made. This is a life organism, structure in motion, which is constantly adapting because of the environment. Life is spreading from the preschool to the families and therefore in and to cities and society, therefore cities should accept that these children have certain special rights. Preschool is never the neutral space, because it is pervaded with culture. At the heart of this institution is

the powerful and most important image of the child, where parents and educators are highly valued as well. This is the system which combines all the elements is an interaction of three basic and different subjects and a place for communication: children, educators and parents (Kroflič, 1997; as cited in Katz. 1996, p. 1).

Children are different - the development of the child`s identity

Malaguzzi thinks that all children should attend preschool and that preschool work should be based on the fact that all children are different. These constructive strategies contribute to the formation of the individuality of every single child. Children are seen as a unique subject with rights and not just with specific needs. Children want to grow, are curious, they have the ability to wonder, they want to be among other people and communicate with them. Preschools have to be small, because if too big and too involved social groups obstruct the development of their own identity. A child`s special abilities and characteristics have to be uncovered, recognized and mostly importantly, respected. Organizing and arranging the space and equipment etc. will then follow (Kroflič, 1997, as cited in Katz. 1996, p. 3).

Development and usage of all senses in the process

Children are encouraged to use all their senses in the learning process - sense of touch, smell and taste. To achieve this it is necessary to allow the child to experience and observe the world that surrounds him in natural and social situations. Universal development of all the senses as well as satisfying the child`s need for emotional perception of physical and social experiences therefore launch exceptionally emotional cooperation, high levels of concentration and the desire to explore. Hands have an important role in this process, because a child creates a relation with things and humans with the help of hands. The result of this process is reflected in outstanding artistic creativity and the exhibitions of children`s work that are mentioned before are the result of that. The intensive and emotional connection with things, living creatures, objects and phenomena brings up many questions. When a child is looking for an answer to those questions, they spread their experiences and thoughts. Organization, conditions and content of the educational work in the Reggio preschools enable the successful linking between sensual feelings with emotion and intellectual development. Experiences have shown that those educators who previously worked at traditional preschools report

that they had the greatest problems getting used to speaking less, because teaching is subordinate to learning in this concept (Kroflič, 1997, as cited in Katz. 1996, p. 6).

Stimulating and making different forms of expressions possible

The authors of the Reggio concept see a child, born with hundreds of languages, losing 99 of them as a result of negligence. In other words, a child has plenty of possibilities for different forms of expression already by nature, but they are not able to develop them by themselves, therefore they need help, affection and support from adults. By stressing and encouraging only one form of expression (verbal), we neglect the development of all other. So here we consciously encourage all forms of expression (motion, mimic, color, drawing, puppet, music, speech etc.) as well as enable a child to express his relation towards himself, others, nature, space and time he lives in. Children are encouraged to develop their own theories about the world from their own experiences and in this way they are developing their creative capabilities (Kroflič, 1997, as cited in Katz. 1996, p. 1).

Learning over teaching

From our standpoint a child shouldn't be taught anything what they couldn't learn by themselves. It is not the educator's task to give the cognition to a child, but to help them develop their own cognition strategy. Children should search for answers on their own, they just have to be guided through the process of asking the right questions. Children who are exploring need an educator by their side - they work hand in hand. An educator has to be capable to listen. He recognizes the questions or silence from child's motions, nonverbal expressions, body language and sight. He sometimes asks for help and other times for no help. The right environment is needed for a child to explore. The main purpose is to develop all the child's potential to a large extent, however the education should not run on the strictly oriented path to achieve a goal.

Instead of using pre-planned curricula, a teacher in the Reggio preschool alerts themselves to the need of young children to learn. The curriculum emerges through project work. The content comes from the children's own curiosity in learning, and from the teacher's observations regarding the children's interests and instances of cognitive discord. Educators have to follow the child and not the plan. At the beginning of the project educators discuss all possible courses of the project, including

ideas, hypothesis and children's choices. In this way we are ready for all possible outcomes, even though they come unexpectedly. Planning includes the preparation and organization of space, materials, situations and opportunities to learn.

Although work isn't planned out in a traditional sense that doesn't mean to say that we just improvise on the spot, without effective planning taking place. Even though the educator constantly follows the child that doesn't mean that he does not have general educational goals in mind. Although those goals are important, it is even more important why and how they are reached. We don't form concrete goals during projects, but instead establish only the hypothesis about what could happen, based on our knowledge and past experiences about children. Goals are then formed, which are flexible and adjusted to the childrens' needs and interests as well as goals which are followed by educators. It is named the Emergent Curriculum (Krooflič, 1997, as cited in Katz. 1996, p. 10).

Quality interaction and communication

The Reggio concept emphasizes on interaction and communication: interaction, connection and communication between all the participants in the educational process – this is an educational core of preschool children. The Reggio concept is to strengthen relations between children, educators and parents, how to assure that educational problems such as educational issues are not neglected, and how to stimulate cooperation and exploration. The goal is connection and understanding. This is the condition for all the participants to feel well and to achieve better results. All possible connection and relation combinations are important:

- Child – child
- Child – adult (-parent/educator)
- Educator – parent
- Educator – educator.

A child's social relations are important factors for forming their own identity. Their actions are always an answer to the social environment in which they live; even psychological structures develop through social interaction. Peers and adults enable children to develop self-confidence. A child has to learn how to communicate with others, and learn how to do this by themselves on an independent basis.

The children socialise, work or play in small/large groups, with or without an educator in the playroom, workroom, mini workroom, or playground. The group is made of independent individuals as well as of

subgroup and group of children with different interests and capabilities. Communication between them varies; some of them take less part than others. Activities in smaller groups (from two to four children) are particularly desired because they allow activities which are tightly connected on each individual child, their wishes, needs and capabilities; therefore enabling greater variation. Conflicts are very productive in smaller groups because they represent a sense of acclimatization for a child. We understand conflicts and their solutions as a motive for a child's growth.

People are curious about the success of parent involvement in the Reggio preschool. However, there is nothing different from the traditional preschool regarding the content and the form of cooperation between parents and the preschool:

- Parents meeting of a certain class
- Parents meeting in smaller groups (specific problems of certain children)
- Individual contacts (in depth discussion about a certain child)
- Professional lectures
- Work meeting with the intention to improve working in living conditions in the preschool (place, playground, equipment, means etc.)
- Workshops (making a puppet, origami, theatre, photography etc.)
- Holiday activities (keeping company with larger number of children and parents in the city, birthdays, grandparent's visits, New Year, etc.)
- Other occasions (excursion escorts, picnics, preschool day, visiting a child at home, visiting working place of the parents, etc.)

Successful work with children increases the interest of parents to cooperate (Kroflič, 1997; as cited in Katz, 1996, p. 14).

We have to mention the exceptional quality team work of the educators and other preschool workers (Malaguzzi - pedagogues - educators - workshop man). Professional freedom emerges, giving greater responsibility and therefore a larger need for discussion and exchange of ideas among colleagues. Meetings take place between colleagues once a week where they discuss various projects in particular groups. Those sessions last for two and a half hours in the afternoons, when most activities are already done. We use different means in those discussions so

to document a child's life and work – video footage, pictures, written materials, documents – these are the components of the process in which children and adults have participated. We observe and analyze those materials from different aspects. We are exchanging ideas and reflections on a daily basis – this is an informal exchange, though has the same value as formal sessions. In that way we can discuss our interpretations, hypothesis and dilemmas with our colleagues. The cooperation is distinguished by extraordinary working enthusiasm and team work, where there is no room for competition (Plestenjak, 1995).

Listening is one of the most important aspects and the most practical approaches of education, which sees the child as an active and competent individual. S. Todd has taken the pedagogy of listening from ethical arguments, but has in practice developed it entirely from the Reggio Emilia concept. C. Rinaldi, who took over the professional managing after the death of L. Malaguzzi, describes the meaning of listening from the evolutionally – psychological point of view:

“The wish of searching for the meaning of life and self is born together with a child. That is why we talk about a child who is competent and strong and as an active subject. Those child's explanatory theories are exceptionally important to us, to help us discover ways in which a child thinks, asks and explains reality ...

As for adults, children's understanding means to be able to develop interpretative theory, the narration that gives the meaning to the events and objects in the world. Our theories are only temporary and we can constantly change them; at the same time they represent more than just an idea or group of ideas. They have to satisfy and convince us, they have to be useful and they have to satisfy our intellectual, emotional and aesthetic needs (the aesthetic of knowledge). When they represent the world, our theories represent us alone. Furthermore, if it's possible, our theories have to satisfy and make others enthusiastic as well ... Our theories have to be heard by others. This allows the transformation of the world: my knowledge and identity are created with the intervention of others also. Mutual theory listening is an answer to (existential) uncertainty and loneliness...” (Kroflič, n.d., p. 5).

The concept of the pedagogy in the Reggio has developed through pedagogical documentation. Documentation serves many purposes but most of all it is used as a research tool for studying children's learning processes. It is based on the documentation and explanation of a child's behavior. The documentation is then used by teachers to analyze

children's understanding, experiences with children, parents and the wider society and place them into the frame (Dyrfjord, 2006).

Documenting children's daily experiences and ongoing projects gives meaning and identity to all that the children do. It is through the documentation that the teachers are able to gain insight into the thoughts of the children, determine further investigation for working on topics, create a history of the work and generate further interest; they are maps of child's products, memories and ideas, photos, as well as comments from teachers and parents and other adults, who are in the contact with a child. They often contain audio and video footage of a child during work. In such way adults and children can enter a world of creativity once more (Kreft, n.d.).

In the Reggio Emilia preschools children have an active role in gaining and constructing the understanding. In the learning-teaching relation, learning is the priority. Malaguzzi says that he doesn't want to lower the decisive role of adults in this process, however he thinks that it is important to stress the children's participation. Children are capable to create meanings from everyday experiences through their own mental activity. The main role of adults is to directly activate the capabilities of a child, which is a foundation to learning. Their declaration states: "Stop for a moment and give space for learning, observe carefully what children are doing and then, if you understand it correctly, the teaching will be different from before."

Children have to have the opportunity to examine, therefore the word explanation shouldn't be a shortcut to knowledge. Listening is more important than speaking; the pedagogues listen to the questions, answers, ideas and children's explanations, without any previous presumptions about what is right and what is wrong. Similar to Piaget, they think that the goal of learning is in assuring the conditions to learn. Instructions, estimation, ritual procedures and rigid curriculum are only creating an illusion of educational system success.

Conclusion

On the basis of written sources we have formed findings, reasons and conclusions. One is that the Reggio Emilia approach is not static, but is constantly growing and developing. Another is that values and cognitions of this pedagogical approach is always part of a wider cultural context, which is shown by the involvement of the preschool into the environmental culture. Institutions are a part of the place and the place is

also the basic part of those institutions. The important thought is that a child is the one from who the education originates. At the heart of this system are the children's diversities and rights. This concept willfully encourages the development of all forms of a child's expressions. Moreover, it stresses the importance of quality communication and cooperation among all the participants in this educational process. The educator's team work and other preschool employees is essential. We have also recognized that educators collect data and that they archive the children's work through different activities, and based on a child's interests, plan the activities. The next finding is that it is important to take safety, goals and guidelines of the curriculum under consideration as well as the educator's vision. The most important thing to consider is always the child, because it is necessary to organize the environment under their measurements. It is always necessary to step into the child's shoes and try to feel and see the environment from their point of view. We have also found out that for the child's motivation, cognitive and social abilities, the learning environment has to be constructed in a way that provides suitable indoor and outdoor areas and also to assure a variety of materials and toys. We have to pay attention to messages we put out for the children on the basis of organizing the environment. We have to strive for creation of a nonsexist and nonracist environment, where children of both sexes and all races are welcome and where diversity is an advantage and not a disadvantage. Those in favor of the Reggio Emilia concept are conscious that the environment itself teaches a child, therefore they have tried to provide the best environment to encourages a child's creativity, variety and visual consciousness. Because they favor learning before teaching, the arrangement of the place is done in a way so to allow children to be present and independent in all rooms. Preschools are divided into characteristic "zones", among which the "piazza" or the square is in front, where children of different ages and their parents could be united, and also the workroom, where children can develop their creativity. The preschool is directly involved in cultural and social life and family life. All the important cultural aspects, like art and popular culture, are included in the children's work and play.

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