



Experiencing Reggio Emilia
Implications for preschool
provision



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Introduction: 'Narratives of the possible'



Lesley Abbott and Cathy Nutbrown

'The Hundred Languages of Children' exhibition will be, for many, the nearest they get to experiencing the provision of Reggio Emilia. Though the documentation which supports the exhibition is extremely helpful in explaining the *process* of teaching and learning in which children and their educators engage, there is no substitute for observing the settings and the town for oneself, and for face-to-face dialogue with the people who work within the Reggio system. In April 1999, over 100 early childhood educators from the UK visited Reggio Emilia. The study tour included: visits to infant-toddler centres and preschools; lectures from leading educationalists in Reggio; workshops run by Reggio staff; and the opportunity to talk with some staff and parents.

This book is not an account of the first UK study tour experience, but an attempt to consider the pedagogic and philosophical implications of the Reggio approach for early childhood education and care in various parts of the UK. We have compiled this collection in order to contribute to the development of understanding something of the Reggio approach for those working in the UK. As such, it adds to the growing literature written *about* the Reggio Emilia experience (Edwards *et al.* 1993; Gura 1997; Johnson 1999) as well as that written *by* those who work within the Reggio Emilia system.

The contributors to this book include people with a variety of experiences and many different professional roles, including: local authority advisory services, architecture, art education, children's rights, inspection, nursery teaching, play, research, special educational needs and training. The diversity of contributions is reflected in the style of the individual chapters which represent these varied experiences and perspectives. What all the chapters have in common is the fact that they derive from a

shared opportunity to observe and explore the theory and practice of early education in Reggio Emilia. Various themes occur and recur throughout the book and we have taken care not to edit out all repetition because the experiences described are key to the perspectives of individual chapters. So, in some chapters themes overlap as authors explore some significant experiences. Reggio educators refuse to be bound by categories that compartmentalize learning and thinking, and similarly the contributors to this book have not confined their reflections to narrow foci, but have drawn on what they saw and felt to construct their own interpretation of Reggio Emilia practice. The structure of this book echoes that ethos of the continuity of experience which is so much part of the Reggio Emilia approach to work with children. We have resisted the usual temptation to 'tidy' the chapters into specific themes; instead the chapters flow, one from another, and we hope unfold some of the questions and excitements, some 'narratives of the possible', which were experienced as a result of studying the work for and with young children in Reggio Emilia.

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1 Experiencing Reggio Emilia

Cathy Nutbrown and Lesley Abbott

What's so special about Reggio Emilia?

Reggio Emilia is a small and historic town in Northern Italy where the Italian tricolour was 'born' on 7 January 1779. During the last quarter of the twentieth century Reggio Emilia became internationally renowned for its provision for young children under 6. It has been a focus of growing interest, attracting visitors from around the globe. The seemingly unique approach to provision, where children from infancy to 6 years of age can learn in community with others, has stimulated much international interest. Presently there are 13 infant-toddler centres catering for children from infancy to 3 years and 21 preschools which offer early education to almost all the town's 3-6-year-olds. The approach to teaching, learning and curriculum is explained in 'The Hundred Languages of Children' exhibition which first came to England in 1997 and toured the UK during 2000.

The experience of Reggio Emilia, in providing challenges to accepted approaches to early childhood education in many countries, is widely acknowledged. Since 1963, when the municipality of Reggio Emilia began setting up its own network of educational services for children from birth to 6 years, the 'Reggio approach' has gained worldwide recognition. Numerous visitors have been impressed by the respect given to the potential of children, the organization and quality of centre and preschool environments, the promotion of collegiality and the ethos of co-participation with families in the educational project.

The Reggio Emilia approach to the education of its young children has grown out of the experience of earlier generations. It has evolved from a resolution to provide something different for future generations, from the growth of the Women's Movement and their desire to make something

better for their children. Reggio children of the early twenty-first century are, it seems, inheriting a preschool experience which was conceived when history pointed their grandparents to a different path, and the cornerstones of community and citizenship in the town became the central pillars of the now famously celebrated Reggio Emilia approach to the education of its youngest citizens. These features of community and citizenship in early education prompt Cathy Nutbrown to ask (in Chapter 13) what children in the early twenty-first century might need from their early planned preschool experiences in order to lead full and satisfying lives as world citizens.

Experiencing Reggio Emilia's provision for young children offers wonderful practical ideas: for example, drawing on acetate over light-boxes, using photographic slides in play, reproposing children's language and drawings, and working in groups on projects sustained over time. However, these are simply (simply!) all practical realizations of other more profound theories about children and their learning, of views of children as strong, powerful, competent learners with the right to an environment which is integral to the learning experience. These deeply held beliefs make one ask questions, require deep thought, inner interrogation about what we think, what we believe, and how those thoughts and beliefs are manifest in our work with and for young children. That quality, that capacity to provoke, is perhaps one of the greatest and lasting legacies of any personal encounter with the Reggio Emilia experience.

What do Reggio Emilia preschools look like?

It is indisputable that schools should have the right to their own environment, their architecture, their own conceptualization and utilization of spaces, forms, and functions.

(Malaguzzi 1996: 40)

Distinctive in all Reggio infant-toddler centres and preschools is the *piazza*: the central meeting place where children from all around the school share their play and conversations together. The tetrahedron with the mirrored interior is often to be found there, with children sitting or standing inside it with their friends, looking at themselves, and many versions of themselves, from all angles. Mirrors proliferate in all the centres in keeping with the central philosophy of 'seeing oneself' and of constructing one's own identity. Another distinctive feature of the Reggio preschools is the *atelier*, the art studio, where children work with the *atelierista* – the experienced and qualified artist who is a member of the staff. The schools are light as a result of the large glass windows from floor to ceiling, and the light, white walls. Colour in the preschool

environments is usually the result of children's work hanging from walls and ceilings. Further descriptions of what is to be found in the centres and preschools are scattered throughout this book with several pen pictures of the various environments for learning in the Reggio schools and centres. But perhaps Jenny Leask's impressions (in Chapter 6) of the infant-toddler centre attended by her son is the most vivid portrayal of how the centres look through the eyes of a parent.

Some of the schools are specially built, others have been built for other purposes and later converted for use as a school. Caroline Hunter (in Chapter 5) describes the preschool her daughter attended and the importance of the building in which the children spend their time. Something of the approach to the integral thinking of the architecture of each building with educational practice is discussed by John Bishop in Chapter 9.

Many of the walls of all the centres and preschools are hung with documentation panels tracing the development of various projects undertaken by different groups of children throughout the schools' history. In one school some brightly painted clay masks surrounded a doorway, accompanied by documentation panels which explained the inception and development of the project to make the masks. The work had been done by a group of children who had long since left the school but it remained in the Reggio preschool as a contribution to the learning community; part of the legacy of learning which fills the environment presently being used by the children who now attend the school. The total environment is important in the Reggio system, for as Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio approach to preschool education, wrote:

... we consider the environment to be an essential constituent element of any theoretical or political research in education. We hold to be equally valuable the rationality of the environment, its capacity for harmonious coexistence, and its highly important forms and functions. Moreover, we place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options, and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security.

It has been said that the environment should act as a kind of aquarium which reflects the ideas, ethics, attitudes and culture of the people who live in it.

(Malaguzzi 1996: 40)

Who are the Reggio educators?

It is easy to generate the view that the educators of Reggio Emilia are unique people; those we met were articulate and confident men and

women who held the shared view of children as competent capable learners, central to their work. Veia Vecchi, an experienced *atelierista* described what underpinned her work with children in an interview in 1998: 'Children have a very basic need to communicate. Their entire day is spent trying to communicate with each other. It isn't always easy. Sometimes they're misunderstood. Misunderstanding can arise not only through a child's choice of words, but also through the listener's expectations of the child' (Gedin 1998: 23). She continued: 'Bringing up children is a social phenomenon. You can't build a good school without the community, without the society. Furthermore, all the different parts of society – the political, the social and the economic – must look at children in the same way, otherwise it's impossible to do a good job in our schools' (p. 25).

During our study tour, we were privileged to meet Veia Vecchi at the Diana School. Her passion for, and deep knowledge of, children and their learning was inspirational. She spent time explaining her work and her processes of documenting children's projects to us, and as she spoke a young woman, newly appointed to work in the school, listened attentively to her every word. This was part of the new *educatore's* professional development – she was learning about her role alongside an experienced, passionate and committed woman who was firmly grounded in her thinking about children and unshakable in her respect for them. It was as if Veia Vecchi was helping this young woman, a novice to Reggio Emilia preschools, to see children through Reggio eyes, teaching her to 'listen' to the various languages children were using to communicate.

As well as its commitment to developing deep, deep insight of children by 'listening' to them, there are two other striking characteristics of the Reggio approach which make its adults somewhat specially situated to work as they do: *time* and *cooperative working*.

Time

Time to discuss children and their projects is an integral element of the professional role and development of all who work with children in Reggio Emilia centres and preschools. By this means, it seems that the *educatore* and *atelierista* are 'grown' in the Reggio experience, and in turn further develop the work which centres around the essential view of children as expressed by Malaguzzi, who said:

Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not only see them as engaged in action with objects, does not emphasise only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the reflective domain. Instead our image of the child is

rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and *most of all connected to adults and children.*

(Malaguzzi 1997: 117, emphasis added)

The educators in Reggio schools and centres spend 6 of their 36 working hours every week without children. This time they spend participating in professional development, planning, preparation and meetings with families – such is the importance given to this spectrum of activity – and in these ways they *stay connected* in their thinking and their approach to being with and working with children and their families. They give children time too – extended periods of time to discuss ideas, develop their cooperative projects, research ways of doing things, try things out, revisit drawings and comments previously made. ‘The Hundred Languages of Children’ exhibition portrays the processes and outcomes of some of these projects, and it too needs to be given time to fully explore the journey of thinking portrayed in the carefully prepared panels of work and documentation. Christine Parker (in Chapter 10) develops the theme of revisiting – or *reproposing* – children’s language and drawings to them over time, describing the effect on her thinking and practice of allowing children time to reflect and transform their words and images should they so wish. Time is an essential ingredient in understanding the work of Reggio Emilia’s preschool education – time to read, reflect, think, discuss. In compiling this collection we have benefited, along with the many contributors to this book, from the opportunity to read, think, rethink, reflect, repropose and discuss our images and responses to visiting the work of Reggio Emilia. This experience serves to emphasize, yet again, the importance of time for professional dialogue and development for all who work in early childhood education and care. We could ask what early education in the UK would look like if everyone who worked with young children spent six daytime hours of their designated working week on professional development, planning, preparation and spending time in meeting with families either individually or in groups. Perhaps the foundation stage will be fully realized when those who are charged with the responsibility of making it work for children are *required* to spend some of their working day really thinking *together* about the children.

Cooperative working

Cooperative working is the other significant characteristic of Reggio education and care. Teachers always work in pairs, each pair of co-teachers being responsible (in the preschools) for a group of children (Valentine 1999: 3). This cooperative structure of staffing seems to be a realization of the values of the Reggio approach as much as a practical solution to

how to work with a group of young children. Co-teaching is a value born out in practice, not simply a way of managing a preschool setting. Working *together*, indeed, *being* together, is deeply rooted in everything that is Reggio: children and parents; children, *educatore* and *atelieriste*; children and children; kitchen staff and children; kitchen staff and *educatore*. During the study tour, staff from the kitchen were observed helping children to water the plants and discussing 'Who is here today?', so that they knew how many places to set for the lunchtime tables. Significantly it was the question 'Who is here today?' not 'How many places do we need?' that was asked first, for the *members* of this learning community (adults and children) were the only reason for needing to know how many places should be set. These overheard conversations were animated, staff and children engaged and at one, because adults were committed to 'listening' to the children. All the adults involved in Reggio preschools and centres seem to work within and live out the same belief in children as 'strong, powerful and competent' members of their community of living and learning *together*.

The community of educators represented in this book have been brought together by their common concern to learn more about children and their learning and to communicate something of their own learning to others. Our experiences are varied, and the paths we have trodden are different. We think differently and, as the chapters illustrate, have seen Reggio Emilia differently. But it is safe to say that we all share the challenge to consider the questions posed to us by the director of Reggio preschools, Carlina Rinaldi (1999). When she addressed us all in Reggio Emilia, she asked:

- What do we hope for children?
- What do we expect from children?
- What is the relationship between school and research?
- What is the relationship between school and education?
- What is the relationship between school, family and society?
- What is the relationship between school and life?
- Is school a preparation for, or part of, life?

These questions lie at the heart of this book, and are embedded in the reflections of the contributors. In writing this book we have interrogated our own thinking, offered some glimpses into the centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia, and some early childhood settings in the UK. Contributors have considered the environments for learning which should be the right of all children, and what might be, given vision and deep, deep understanding and respect for children. In her introduction to the exhibition 'The Hundred Languages of Children' in 1996, the mayor of Reggio Emilia, Antonella Spaggiari, said:

Here on the threshold of the twenty-first century, we have an enormous challenge ahead of us in Europe and worldwide: the challenge of providing high quality educational services for young children. The results will be decisive for the future of humankind and for children's right to happiness. My hope is that this challenge will be effectively confronted by many countries and governments throughout the world.

(Spaggiari 1996: ix)

This is indeed the international challenge for politicians, policymakers, researchers, educators, economists and parents – indeed it can be seen as the responsibility of all adult citizens. The message contained within this book is that there is something to learn by looking elsewhere. Looking at Reggio, experiencing Reggio Emilia, has enabled those who have contributed to this book to learn something more and to think again about the implications our learning might hold for early childhood education and care throughout the regions of the UK.

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