

The silent teacher:

What a city on the other side of the world has taught me about what it means to be a listening teacher

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I am confident in saying that anyone who has visited the Preschool and Infant Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia comes away from this experience with an indelible realisation of the importance of culture in the educational experiences of their youngest citizens. The idea that children should be educated within the history of a city is at the heart of this approach. You can see this, both in the centres and in the city. This is a very real, lived idea that the educational experiences of children should be congruent with the experiences of their everyday life. As Jerome Bruner said, *"You cannot understand the Reggio Schools if you don't understand the city that made them"*, (Hall, 2010, p.77). Put simply: Reggio Emilia is an educating city.

A common view of the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia is one that focuses on the natural development of children and the inter-relational links between environment and culture. This is an educational approach that views children as competent, co-constructors of knowledge. This view of children sees them as capable of big potentials and considers the emergence of identity inextricably linked to children's relationships with others. The key message – that knowledge is constructed within relational contexts.

A comment made by the Mayor of Reggio Emilia, Luca Vecchi, in his opening address to the 2016 International Study Group delegation of which I was a member, has occupied a lot of my thoughts since my return in April and it has shown me that there is another view to this approach to early education that I had not considered before. Mayor Vecchi said that in considering the early learning centres of Reggio Emilia it was clear that,

"we need a silent place, where we can think more and think better".

Listening/ascoltando...

In Reggio Emilia they say that,

"silence is like oxygen and that silence is its own dialogue".

This idea had a profound impact on me and directed many of my observations and questions over the following week. This idea has provided me with a new framework in which to consider the role of the teacher and their professional identity.

I now have a framework that views teachers as the holder of rights. This framework considers that the rights of educators are to: participate, collaborate and contribute. To enact these rights, educators are required to have a willingness to engage on a professional level.

Like all early learning spaces, the Infant Toddler Centres of Reggio Emilia are vibrant, busy spaces. Like our services in Australia, their days are also punctuated by routines and structures and there is a rhythm and flow that is not dissimilar to what you might see in Australia. What is different however is that the Preschool and Infant Toddler Centres of Reggio Emilia are underpinned by a pedagogy of listening. This means that the teachers join their attention to children's attention and the result is children and adults being able to recognise capacities and qualities in each other. These teachers do not always rely on asking questions and provoking conversations as a way of engaging with children. I was able to observe many examples of children and teachers at work with very little or no verbal dialogue between them. These are teachers who give children the time, space and resources to think long and deeply.

Whilst within the Infant Toddler and Preschool Centre's busy and industrious spaces, learning and discovery



A crowd made of clay at the *Loris Malaguzzi International Centre Piazza*

opportunities abounded, I was struck by how noiseless, seamless and fluid they were. The sound I could not hear was the sound of the over prodding, over questioning, over nudging adult. This is what a listening pedagogy looks like in practice. The idea of a listening pedagogy and the kind of environment it produces was described by Marika Fontana, (personal communication, April 2016) a teacher in a Reggio Emilia centre as creating,

“a place of tranquil movement”.

This is a place where teachers and children can build a common story. The view that all knowledge is constructed in a relational context defines these programs and it is clear that the experiences of the children and their teachers are congruent with the experiences of everyday life. The children at the centre of this approach are fortunate enough to encounter teachers who listen to them. What I have learnt from my observations of the teachers in Reggio Emilia is that silence can move you from one point in time to another, and that silence is not a space to always be filled.

The environment in these services is a system of relationships and these relationships are very much on display. This is an approach that is a continuous dialogue with children, with teachers, with parents, with architecture, with community. Knowledge, they say, is essentially multidisciplinary. What is most important is ‘relationships’.

Thinking/pensiero...

In as much as the Reggio Emilia approach asks us to consider the competent child, they also ask us to consider the competent teacher. The role of the teacher in Reggio Emilia is to offer context and to do this the educator must be engaged in the world and curious about contemporary conditions. This idea requires us to get involved as teachers and learn together with children. Whoever is a competent teacher is a learning teacher. The connection between the intelligent adult and the role they play in creating knowledge in children is explained perfectly in the following quote from a child from the Diana Municipal Preschool:

If a person is intelligent and knows lots of things, he teaches them to the child, so that the child grows up, becomes an adult, and if he has a child, he teaches him too, and it goes on like that.... (Reggio Children, 1995, p.33)

Indeed!

Growth/crescita

Reggio Emilia has competent and creative teachers and they are valued and respected. There is a view that all teachers have the right to contribute. This view of teachers is based on an organisation of deeply held assumptions of shared, collective responsibility at all levels. Carla Rinaldi reminds us that:

“The competent and creative child exists if there is a competent and creative adult”.

(Rinaldi, 2005, p.94)

Unlike the way many of our early learning services in Australia are structured, what is most visible to the observer in Reggio Emilia is the lack of hierarchy amongst the educators. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach was opposed to hierarchy and believed more strongly in the power of the collective. This collaborative approach between teachers, *pedagogisti* and *atelieristi*, relies on participation by all stakeholders as a defining part of the pedagogical approach.

While I do not speak Italian and have no way of knowing what the teachers in Reggio Emilia were saying to each other as they worked with the children and each other, I got the sense it was not about break times, shifts or ratios. It was not about who did or did not unpack the dishwasher/fold the washing/pack up the playground. I was absolutely struck by the intense levels of engagement they demonstrated in what they were *doing* with children. These are teachers who love what they do.

The teachers of Reggio Emilia also have a different view of professional development that stands in stark contrast to our own. This contrast starts with the very word *development*. In Reggio Emilia they use the word *growth* – professional growth. Rather than viewing professional development as an external training opportunity or workshop that relies on a dose or quantitative approach, they believe that the minute a teacher walks through the door in the morning their professional growth starts and the purpose of professional growth is to help you find the keys to interpret the learning journeys.

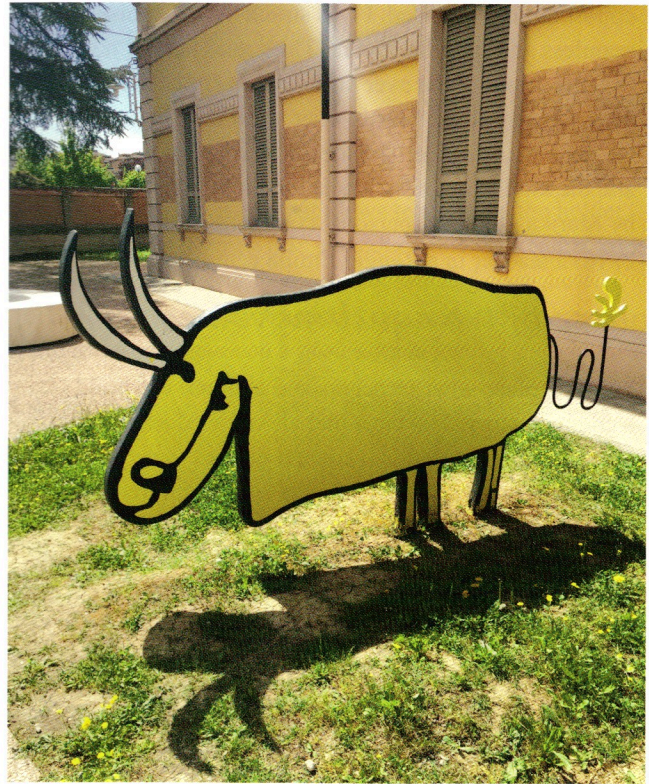
I wondered if the professional development opportunities that Australia’s early childhood educators participate in are becoming more about ‘enterTRAINment’ than professional growth. It occurs to me that the difference in meaning between these two words, development and growth, speaks loudly about the approach that each country takes. In Australia professional development has become a consequence or event. In Reggio Emilia professional growth is demonstrated through the

evidence that it happened, and in the Infant Toddler Centres and the Preschools the evidence is everywhere!

It is often said that the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education is not a recipe. That is true, but it can be an inspiration. *We* can take what it means to be a teacher in Reggio Emilia and apply these principles to our own contexts. The challenge is not to lose the complexity of our own cultural footprints. As the holder of rights, teachers are able to make contributions to pedagogy, research, community, interactions and the construction of knowledge. We can also be learning teachers.

References

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Sculpture outside the *Loris Malaguzzi International Centre*