

The aim of this essay is to create a body of knowledge for a follow-on critical analysis of the underpinning philosophy of the Reggio Emilia approach in relation to a nursery classroom of a UK primary school. For this purpose, information was gathered through observations, as well as through the study and analysis of materials presented in books, research journals and professional publications, so as to compare main features of pedagogical theories and models behind the Italian and the British systems of early years education.

As we enter an exciting time of development in early years provision, practitioners from a wide variety of settings, bringing a range of strengths, training and experience to the foundation stage, are linked by a common aim - to offer young children learning opportunities and experiences of the highest possible quality, while ensuring that the care and curriculum they receive are appropriate to their needs and stage of development.

Throughout history, Europe has represented an intense source of many influential educational ideas. In early childhood education, one of the best-known approaches with European origin is Reggio Emilia, which is seen as a strong educational alternative to traditional education and as a source of inspiration for progressive educational reform. Research shows that there are many themes and elements regarding children and their development, which are common to both Italian and British educational systems. What exactly are their respective historical origins and foundational philosophical concepts about child development and learning? How do they compare with respect to organizational structures, curriculum and school environments? What are their parallels and contrasts?

The foundation for the Reggio Approach started in Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy, at the end of the Fascist dictatorship and the Second World War. According to Gandini (1997: 57), "it was a moment when the desire to bring change and create a new, more just world, free from oppression was urging women and men to gather their strength and build with their own hands schools for their children." More specifically, teachers worked to develop new ways of teaching, which would support the new democratic society. The schools they created combined the concept of social services with education; they were non-selective and non-discriminatory that took into account the human desire to "do nothing without joy."(Gandini, 1997: 57)

Loris Malaguzzi, the educational leader of the movement, persuaded the city government to assume responsibility for running the schools in 1963. A series of national laws passed between 1968 and 1971 made possible the development of the Reggio Approach as it is known today. The City Council, representing a population of approximately 139,000 people, presently invests 12% of its budget in preschool services.

At the same period in Britain the decline in family size and the closure of day nurseries after the Second World War had reduced the opportunities for children to play with other children. Simultaneously, awareness of the educational value of play became more widespread. At that time it was impossible for Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to increase the number of nurseries, because the Ministry of Education Circular 8/60 stated that there could be no expansion of nursery school provision. The lack of LEA provision of nursery places and growing parental interest in young children's welfare and education created a new type of preschool provision: playgroups, which were welcomed by the educational authorities as a low-cost substitute for nursery schools (Cleave, Jowett, 1982).

In 1972, Margaret Thatcher, as Secretary of State for Education, presented a White Paper, which proposed that nursery education be provided for all who wanted it, saying that by 1980 there would be nursery school places for 50% of 3-year-olds and 90% of 4-year-olds. However, this promised nursery expansion was not forthcoming because of the economic recession. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, non-statutory preschool provision was neglected and undeveloped (Kent, 1999).

In view of the **image of a child in education**, the Reggio Approach is first and foremost child-centred, based on individual children's needs and interests, and on educators' respect for the differences between individual children. It encompasses the theoretical contributions of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, and is similar to the Montessori preschool method:

"At the centre of the Reggio pedagogy is the child who is competent in building relationships; who holds his own values; who wants to be valued for himself; who respects others; who embodies a curiosity and open-mindedness to all that is possible" (Brunton, 2000: 14)

Similar to the Italian system the main principles of traditional early childhood education in Britain are child-centred (Bruce, 1987). The most influential publication in the child-centred tradition was the Plowden Report, some of the statements of which have become "classic expressions of child-centredness, such as "at the heart of the educational process lies the child" and "the child is the agent of his own learning". (Dearden, 1976: 49)

Despite the fact that both Italian and British educational theorizing shares the same theme, resting on the principle that our ideas about "the child" determine the essence of education, the reflections of this principle in the curricula and learning environments of both systems are quite dissimilar.

The basic belief of Reggio curriculum is that knowledge is constructed as a system of relations, so that the simple association between two stimuli, or between a stimulus and a response, is insufficient for defining the knowledge-building process. It is only through a process of reflection and revisiting that children are able to organize what they have learned from a single experience within a broader system of relations. These processes are individually and socially constructed, and herein lies the image of the child as an active constructor of his or her own knowledge. (Forman, 1995)

Research into children's thinking and learning plays a critical role in determining the philosophy and practice of Reggio, where the teachers within the system believe that "children possess their own theories and it is the task of the teacher to create a context in which children's theories are listened to and encouraged" (Brunton, 2000: 14)

The curriculum of Reggio is mostly built on creating and developing children initiated educational projects, also known as the "project approach" or "project work." Children's theories are developed through focused discussion among children and adults, and their ideas are initially expressed in drawings, which they then explain to the group:

"With sensitive guidance from the teacher (or pedagoga), children with similar theories are encouraged to re-launch their ideas co-operatively and to develop them through discussion, drawing, three-dimensional; representation and re-enactment" (Forman, 1995). The entire learning process is documented as it goes along, so that teachers can identify the learning strategies used by each child and use this knowledge to build a greater understanding of the interrelationship in the processes of teaching and learning. The process of "documentation" (Katz & Chard, 1996) involves documenting pupil's work at various stages of completion. For example, a child may work on a particular drawing, which the teacher then photographs, makes an audio recording of the

child talking about his or her experience with the project, and take notes on supplies used or observations made. All this provides a visual display of learning. However, the focus remains on children's thoughts, memories and overall experience rather than the work itself.

"All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in engaging in social interaction, establishing relationships, constructing their learning, and negotiating with everything the environment brings to them." (Bredenkamp, 1993: 13) As children participate in their activities, it is important for them to make and correct their own errors. This approach provides the necessary opportunity to become practiced at creative problem solving. Teachers must have enough respect for children in order to permit these processes to occur. In other words, the children are considered to be competent. Reggio teachers neither provide solutions nor leave children to their own resources. The child-centred curriculum of Reggio Emilia Schools is based on this image of children as full of life, power, and confidence rather than full of need (i bid).

In contrast to Reggio curriculum fundamentals emphasising the priority of learning process itself against the final product, early years educators in Britain feel great pressure to promote particular and pre-specified learning outcomes, many of which focus on literacy and numeracy. A crucial moment in the recent developments of early childhood curriculum in Britain was represented by the introduction of the framework for early years education in a form of the *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning*, which in 1999 were replaced with *Early Learning Goals*. In 2000, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* was published, which intended "to help practitioners plan to meet the diverse needs of all children so that most will achieve and some, where appropriate, will go beyond the early learning goals by the end of the foundation stage" (QCA, 2000: 5). It is notable that although the curriculum

guidance claims to describe integrated learning within six areas of development, it also emphasizes literacy and numeracy as distinct curriculum areas, as opposed to the basics of Reggio approach.

As Malaguzzi accentuates, Reggio schools "do not have a planned curriculum, as the behaviourists would like. These would push us towards teaching without learning, humiliating the children by entrusting them to forms and handbooks"(Cornwell, 2001: 25). This point of view designates a considerable contrast with the *Early Learning Goals*, which specify particular achievements to be expected of 4- and 5-year-olds, such as learning to count up to 10 or recognizing letters by shape and sound.

The environment in Reggio schools serves as a valuable source of learning, intended not only to "underpin and support daily routines but also as an aesthetic" (Penn, 1997: 55). As Malaguzzi affirms, teachers of Reggio value space "because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective, and cognitive learning. All of this contributes to a sense of well-being and security in children. The space has to be a sort of aquarium which mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it" (Forman, 2001). Based on this power, Rinaldi stated that the environment is the third teacher (Bennett, 2001).

Within a typical Reggio school the entrance hall leads to the dining hall, while a working kitchen, which is visible at all times, enhances the family atmosphere (Brunton, 2000: 14). The piazza, the central space, is a place for interaction and play and complements the classroom connected to it. The classrooms are organized into "spaces", which allow children to interact with others or to be alone. The appearance of each facility is like that of an

excellent, experiential museum for children: colour, light, mirrors, shadows, recyclable materials, and natural artefacts including plants are used to enhance the environment and provide discovery opportunities. Each school also has an "atelier" - the creative and discovery area - where children work on extended projects. Graphic languages, the atelierista, and the atelier are all "critical to the goals of the philosophy and belief systems in Reggio Emilia. Art is the medium by which the educators in Reggio Emilia are encouraging the children to communicate. It is the medium by which their teachers "listen" to the children"(Forman, 2001).

As suggested by Reggio teachers and other researchers, children learn more effectively "when they are able to use a wide variety of materials in a wide range of activities and in cooperation with adults who help them ask good questions"(Cornwell, 2001: 24).

As personal observations show, the structure of classroom organization in Reggio schools seems to be quite close to the arrangements within a typical nursery classroom in Britain, such as providing different areas for planned and spontaneous play opportunities or including a whole range of different materials for creative and investigative activities. However, research suggests that in British early years settings space is viewed more like "an aspect of health and safety" (Penn, 1997: 55), whereas in Reggio Emilia it is considered to be "a part of the cultural heritage" (Burkett, 1999).

In the Italian nurseries the children's own work is not usually preserved or displayed prominently, since much more prominence is given to the group than the individual. There is also a view that although the children might have fun in making things, "they are too young to produce anything artistic and their work simply does not merit display" (Penn, 1997: 56) This point of view seems to be unacceptable within a nursery classroom in a British school, where displaying children's work has become almost compulsory for the purpose of

developing children's self-esteem and celebrating their achievements. Observations and participation in the routines of UK nurseries convincingly proved that the value of children's work should not be underestimated as it provides meaningful recognition of children's efforts and creates an interesting, stimulating and purposeful learning environment.

An essential component of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is an intense community spirit and collaboration among all adults and children in the school. The role of teachers is considered to be one of continual research and learning process, taking place with the children and embedded in team cooperation. The research of the teachers is supported by the pedagogical coordinator or pedagoga. Each pedagoga supports 3-4 schools. The team of pedagogisti meet once a week with the director of the whole system. In addition six hours each week are set aside for in-service training, i.e. time spent by the teachers on personal professional development. (Drury et al, 2000: 22)

A community commitment stems from the fact that "it was parents and children who gathered the stones and sand from the river to build the first of the pre-schools, and it seems only appropriate for the curriculum to be based on parent/teacher/student collaboration" (Burkett, 1999). Therefore, parental involvement is synonymous with community involvement, and thus the concept of supportive relationships goes beyond Italy's idea that children are the collective responsibility of the state.

Parents are essential participants in all planning and in many activities: they help with projects, discuss projects with their children, and help children gather information for projects:

"Parents are encouraged to be an integral part of their children's learning from the first days in the infant-toddler centres or pre-schools. They willingly give time and expertise in building, constructing or providing the

materials needed for the class. Regular weekly meetings are held with teachers or with other parents to discuss ways that assistance can be given." (Holland, 1996: 11)

Research suggests that in contrast to Reggio approach, which emphasizes more group participation and collaboration rather than working alone, the learning outcomes of a British pre-school setting seem to be valued more in a form of individual work. Personal experience in this field provides little evidence to suggest that collaborate work and group projects are considered to be a prominent part of the learning process.

Discussions with parents, teachers and other members of staff in local nurseries revealed a high level of eagerness among most of the parents to devote their time and experiences to contribute to their children's learning. However, if compared to the situation in Reggio schools, parents in the UK have little chances to participate in planning process due to the strict constrains of the curriculum requirements.

The judgment of time is regarded as an important part of Reggio approach. Just as in Montessori schools, "children's own sense of time and their personal rhythm is considered in planning and carrying out activities and projects" (Cornwell, 2001: 26). Children know that their work will remain intact and in place until they have completed their task. Children have the time and guidance to use the same materials repeatedly until they are pleased with the results.

Personal observations and teaching experience show that time in British schools is more "fragmental" if compared to Reggio scheme. Most British teachers feel the pressure to cover required contents: they rush from one activity to another, pushed by the schedules that fit children's activities into music, P.E., lunch, maths and so forth. In Reggio Emilia children seem to "flow" from one activity to the next: they are not urged to hurry to complete a

project because teachers are not trying to initiate a different activity. However, this aspect can be explained by the idea that perception of time in Reggio is strongly influenced by ethnic traditions and Italian culture itself.

Taken as a whole the described set of principles of Reggio schools seems to offer an ideal model for early childhood education, but is it realistic to apply these concepts to the British educational system?

One of the most difficult aspects seems to be the process of combining the infinite number of ideas suggested by teachers, parents and children, and in presenting these ideas in a form of a "spontaneous curriculum." The research has little to suggest that the lack of structure and time limitation would be productive in the UK early years practice. Furthermore, following personal observations it seems to be an inconsistent community involvement, as well as a lack of parent participation, which would contribute to difficulties in translating Reggio approach to the British educational system. However, there are many ways UK educators can benefit from the Reggio model, such as challenging formal schemes and practices, considering positive features of an unplanned curriculum, welcoming child-initiated activities, practicing flexible timetable, encouraging parents' cooperation, and most importantly, LISTENING to children. Listening to children will help teachers to understand better how a child's potential is implemented, how he explores the world, how he understands the world, and how he chooses to communicate with the world, which therefore will assist teachers to put into practice the most successful methods of learning.