

Seeing beyond the wall

Children's University Chief Executive Ger Graus urges educators to revisit the Reggio Emilia principles about learning and consider its approach for the children of today...

Many readers will have come across The Hundred Languages of Children exhibition, originally entitled When the Eye Jumps Over the Wall, meaning that children's eyes and adults' eyes must see beyond the wall. We know that children love this – to go over the wall of banality, to go over the wall of established educational procedures and expectations.

Born in the Italian province of Reggio Emilia, Loris Malaguzzi was instrumental in bringing this educational philosophy to a wider audience of parents and other educators worldwide. Malaguzzi's manifesto states: 'The child has a hundred languages (and then a hundred hundred hundred more) but they steal ninety-nine. The school and the culture separate the head from the body. They tell the child to think without their hands, to do and make without their head, to listen and not to speak, to understand without joy, to feel love and awe only at Easter and Christmas. They tell the child to discover the world that is already there.'

This extract encapsulates several key points of Malaguzzi's beliefs about education: that children and their viewpoint are to be taken seriously; that education should not be defined only in terms of what governments decide should be taught; that it should not solely be subjected to categorisation in the form of curriculum subjects; and that it should arise from a response to the child's inquisitiveness, creativity and search for meaning. Indeed, asked whether he advocated curriculum planning, Malaguzzi is said to have responded that this – not unlike lesson planning – may very well lead to 'teaching without learning'.

In describing his approach, Malaguzzi employs two metaphors that are useful in helping us to understand his educational thinking. One presents the educative process as the throwing of a ball back and forth between child and

teacher, an exchange in which both players cooperate equally in the play, its learning and development of ideas. Another is of teacher and child embarking together on a journey downriver, rather than standing on opposite banks watching the river flow.

Of course, Malaguzzi's model is not the only approach to education – there is no such thing as a single solution. Rather, it is an important example of a model that is an ideal. However, one of the cornerstones of a good education must be to provide learners with examples that encourage them to ask questions of their learning. The Reggio Emilia educational approach and philosophy insists that children learn readily from their environment (now including the internet of course), and therefore the environment is the 'third' teacher (the child and the adults being the first and second teachers).

Obviously, children still have to memorise times tables, do long division and adhere to other requirements of national curricula, because in reality these constitute the nationally 'non-negotiable' agenda of teaching, learning, testing and institutionalised accountability. The focus should, however, be on making connections between rote learning and purposes, tools and application in the real world; not just with storybook maths problems about people buying apples and pears. Children should be provided with opportunities to create their own story problems from their own experiences. True, teachers and other educators still have to be active guides helping these children achieve their questions and their answers (when possible). But maybe they should take the role of a post-modern mini-Socrates?

Sometimes we need to deconstruct ourselves as learners to better understand the subject of how to teach. Next, we need to understand learning from the perspectives of others.



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