

Insight: Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia's early childhood services are known throughout the world. Thousands visit every year and the exhibition, 'The Hundred Languages of Children', has been to more than 100 cities in over 20 countries. But what is Reggio? And why does it attract such interest?

Reggio is a town with 150,000 inhabitants in Northern Italy. The organisation, which is based there, consists of a network of 33 centres for children from birth to six years, built up and supported by the local authority. But most importantly, Reggio is a body of pedagogical thought and practice, the product of 40 years' commitment to young children and their families.

Is Reggio an example of the mainstream, only done better than most? I doubt this, especially since editing, with Gunilla Dahlberg, a new book: *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*. It brings together writings, speeches and interviews by Carlina Rinaldi, a former director of Reggio's services, now a consultant for Reggio Children.

What emerges is a local experience that challenges the early years mainstream. But the challenge is not how to copy Reggio, not how best to create a new mainstream. Rather, the challenge is to the very idea of a mainstream, that there is one 'best practice' to find and adopt.

Reggio is a constant reminder that there are many possibilities in the early childhood field, so we have choices to make: not consumer choices, but political and ethical choices based on our answers to critical questions such as 'what is our image of the child?' or 'how do we understand knowledge and learning?' We have made our choice, they say in Reggio, now what is yours?

Important values

Much early childhood work in the English-speaking world, including Britain, is dominated by a central

Further information

■ *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning* by Carlina Rinaldi is published by RoutledgeFalmer, price £21.99. Other books in the Contesting Early Childhood series, edited by Peter Moss and Gunilla Dahlberg, include: *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education* by Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss; *Unequal Childhoods* by Helen Penn; and *Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies* by Glenda MacNaughton.

It's your choice

The writings of Reggio Children consultant Carlina Rinaldi reveal a philosophy that challenges the fundamental concepts of mainstream education. **Peter Moss** explains

idea: that we can and should identify a definitive set of outcomes for young children, the best technologies to achieve them, and methods to assess children's attainment of these outcomes. Certainty, linearity, objectivity and one right answer for every question are highly valued.

Reggio's work starts from quite different premises. It questions the desirability of predetermined goals, exploring instead alternative ways to think and give meaning to the world in which subjectivity, surprise, amazement and openness to doubt are all important values. From this perspective, learning is a process of constructing meaning while knowledge, in the words of Reggio's co-founder Loris Malaguzzi, is like 'a tangle of spaghetti' with no beginning, middle or end, but always shooting off in new directions.

Carlina puts it this way in her new book. 'Learning does not proceed in a linear way, determined and deterministic, by progressive and predictable stages, but rather is constructed through advances, standstills, and "retreats" that take many directions. The construction of knowledge is a group process. Each individual is nurtured by the hypotheses and theories of others, and by conflicts with others, and advances by co-constructing pieces of knowledge with others through a process of confirmation and disagreement. Above all, conflict and disturbance force us to constantly revise our interpretive models and theories on reality, and this is true for both children and adults.'

This calls for a workforce with particular qualities. Uncertainty and subjectivity become values not limitations. Divisions between theory and



practice go out of the window: 'Theory and practice should be in dialogue, two languages expressing our effort to understand the meaning of life. When you think, it's practice; and when you practice, it's theory. "Practitioner" is not a wrong definition of the teacher. But it's wrong that they are not also seen as theorists.' The early childhood worker is both a theorist and a researcher: 'It's not that we don't recognise [academic] research, but we want our research, as teachers, to be recognised. And to recognise research as a way of thinking, of approaching life, of negotiating, of documenting.'

This is a long way from a world of curriculum guidelines, early learning goals and assessment profiles which requires different ways of conceptualising the worker and different ways of working. Carlina discusses her attempts to develop a concept of curriculum that 'fits' Reggio - what she terms 'contextual curriculum'. But she admits that this 'arises from my wish to be understood by those who use the



Images from 'The Hundred Languages of Children' exhibition (clockwise, from top): Diana School – the Atelier, Painting at the Infant-toddler Center and The Fountain of Umbrellas.

Photos: Catalogue of the Exhibition 'The Hundred Languages of Children' © Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy, published by Reggio Children, 1996 – www.reggiochildren.it

language of curriculum and believe in the importance of curriculum.'

In Reggio they talk about *progettazione* – 'a strategy, a daily practice of observation-interpretation-documentation.' It implies a flexible approach in which initial hypotheses are made about classroom work (as well as about staff development and relationships with parents), but are subject to modifications and changes of direction as the actual 'project work' progresses. There is no place here for predetermined outcomes and linear progression, but an openness to the unexpected and new thought by children and adults alike.

Reggio, too, has its own take on evaluation. Rather than assessing services and children against predetermined criteria, evaluation in Reggio is a participatory and interpretive exercise involving teachers, children, parents and others in the community, and working with the powerful tool of pedagogical documentation. It is a process for making pedagogical (or other)

work visible and subject to interpretation, dialogue, argument and understanding. It also embodies the value of subjectivity, since there can be no objective point of view that makes observation neutral; but at the same time, it insists on rigorous subjectivity by making perspectives and interpretations explicit and contestable through documenting in relationship with others. Documentation fosters a conflict of ideas and argumentation, not a cosy search for consensus.

Pedagogical documentation is a multi-purpose tool. It is a method for evaluation. But it is also a way for teachers to research children's learning processes; it enables theory and practice to be connected in everyday work; it provides professional development; and it is democratic practice that makes for a transparent centre.

Challenging views

Underpinning these examples, Reggio understands early childhood services in ways that challenge a view wide-

spread in Britain today. From Reggio's perspective, services are neither private businesses selling a product to parents as consumers, nor places for applying technologies to ensure children achieve predetermined outcomes.

The organisation's starting point, Reggio's image of the early childhood centre, is that it is a collective responsibility and a public space – a place of encounter, interaction and connection among citizens in a community. As such, it is a place of many possibilities: a construction site, a workshop, a permanent laboratory are just some of Carlina's images of the early childhood centre.

In our introduction to the book, Gunilla and I also suggest that Reggio offers another understanding of the early childhood centre: as, first and foremost, a site for ethical and political practice rather than instrumental technical practice.

Reggio, for example, has created a politics of learning and childhood, stimulated by that simple but powerful question: what is your image of the child? Reggio's answer has been the 'rich child', an image based on the understanding that all children are intelligent, meaning that all children are embarked on a course of making meaning of the world, a constant process of constructing knowledge, identity and value. It has struggled to show the potentialities of each child and to give each child the democratic right to be listened to and to be a recognised citizen in the community.

Reggio is not a model or a 'best practice'. This extraordinary pedagogical work has arisen from a particular context, a particular history and particular political and ethical choices. Reggio's relationship to others, therefore, is not commercial; it does not want to export a product. It is a relationship of hope that offers a sense of belonging and inspiration to those who look for different values and ways of thinking to those they find around them. It is also, in Carlina's words, 'a place of encounter and dialogue' with others.

Through this dialoguing, Reggio enables people to enter a learning process, a process of co-constructing their own knowledge, values and identity, a relationship with Reggio in which it is possible for those in dialogue to retain their 'otherness' without becoming Reggio clones. **NW**