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Historical features of contemporary epistemology of early childhood education: Maria Montessori and Loris Malaguzzi

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Introduction

According to my personal point of view, knowing something about the real life of the educators we study is a propedeutical track in order to understand better their philosophical ideas, their pedagogical choices, their theoretical heritage. This is the reason why I decided to present, as a paradigm of epistemologies of contemporary early childhood education, the philosophies of education of Maria Montessori and Loris Malaguzzi, examined from a historical – diachronic point of view.

On the contrary of the first analytic philosopher of education, Charles D. Hardie, who believed to be able to find once for all truths and fallacies in educational theories,¹ I believed that theories are hidden in something more flexible than the positivistic idea of scientific theory, that is educational discourses contained in texts, written in certain times in a certain context for certain social and historical purposes.

So, each brief summary of the life and the works of each educationist will be followed by a brief summary of their educational philosophy of education (more explicit in Maria Montessori, more implicit in Loris Malaguzzi), conducted in order to show the lively development of their theories and practices.

1. MARIA MONTESSORI: HER LIFE AND WORKS

Premise

To face with Maria Montessori means, both for the specialist and the man/woman of the street, to face with the main issues of education of the XIX and XX centuries, concerning the nature of education (conformation to a model or free expression of vital energies?), the idea of children (small people to be adultized as soon as possible or carriers of a peculiar vision of the world?) and the features of educational enterprise (a “natural” tradition in order to reproduce the relationships of production or a collective planning effort for cutting chains?). Let us first follow the growth of Maria Montessori’s educational philosophy having a brief look to her substantial life.

1.1. Maria Montessori when she was a child, a girl and a young woman

Maria Montessori² was born on August 31, 1870 at Chiaravalle, a village in the province of Ancona, in the region of Marche, central Italy, on the Adriatic Sea, facing the Croatia, in the typical environment of a Catholic middle-class family.

¹ C. D. Hardie, *Truth and Fallacy in Educational Theory*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1942 (first edition); New York, Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1962 (second edition; pref. to the American ed. and bibliography by James E. McClellan and B. Paul Komisar).

² Sources for this part are E. M. Standing, *Maria Montessori, her life and works*, with an introduction by John J. McDermott, New York : New American Library, 1957 (1), 1984 (2); R. Kramer, *Maria Montessori: a biography*, with a foreword by Anna Freud, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976 (1), 1983 (2); M. T. Shephard, *Maria Montessori: teacher of teachers*, Minneapolis, Lerner Publications Co., 1996. A recent movie could be useful in order to reach a

Her father, Alessandro, was a clerk, very sensitive to the new political ideals of the united Italy, and her mother, Renilde Stoppani, was the grandchild of the famous scholar Antonio Stoppani,³ the author of a very popular book, *Il Bel Paese (The Beautiful Country)*.⁴

When Maria was 3 years old, the Montessori family went first to Florence and then to Rome, the neo-capital of the Italian United Kingdom, because of the job of the father. After having suffered of rubella during the years of the elementary school, Maria became a brilliant student. Against the willingness of the family, she attended the newly open “Royal Technical School”, studying with passion mathematics and natural sciences, and she was one of the first 10 girls to take the diploma.

After the high school, she chose another difficult career for a girl, asking and obtaining the enrollment at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Rome. This choice arose questions both in the family, used to this kind of debates, and in the academic environment, not very friendly with the female attendance of traditionally male-oriented faculties.

1.2. Maria Montessori as a doctor and a young scholar

In 1896 she graduated in Medicine, with a dissertation about *Clinical contribution to the study of the hallucinations of antagonistic content*. She obtained good results in experimental works in hygiene, psychiatrics and pediatrics, her future field of works. Even if an urban legend says that she was the first female doctor in Italy (but it is not true: the first female graduated in medicine was Ernesta Paper, in 1877), Maria Montessori was anyway the first woman really working as a doctor in Italy, having got the legal certification to act as a professional in this field.

In 1897, she was appointed assistant professor in the Neuropsychiatric Department of the University of Rome, where she met her colleague and mentor Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano, the son of a famous lawyer. After this professional and sentimental meeting, in 1898 a baby was born, Mario, recognized by the father as a Montesano: but they did not marry, because of the difference of social status and the opposition of both families. Mario was left to a family in the countryside near Rome, while Maria was building up her career: she came back to him when he was almost 14 years old, and then he became her mother’s assistant.

Let us allow a small digression, at this point: is there a relationship between the life and the thought of a scholar? To which extent? We know that Maria Montessori was heavily criticized for the choice of leaving her son to another family, “selfishly” preferring to grow up other children (helping her to become what she became) and not her own child. But we know that Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the «father» of modern pedagogy, abandoned many children all over the Europe: if we apply the same line of reasoning, how can we still seriously take in account his *Emilius*, the Bible of modern education? And we know also that Martin Heidegger, the famous existentialist philosopher, was appointed for 1 year Rector of the University of Freiburg (Germany), in 1933, pronouncing a famous filo-Nazi speech: if we apply the same line of reasoning, how can we seriously take in account his philosophy of Being and Time? My opinion is that, in

wider audience about this educator: *Maria Montessori: una vita per I bambini (Maria Montessori: a life for children)*, directed by Gianluca Maria Tavarelli, screenplay by Gianmario Pagano and Monica Zapelli with the collaboration of Gianluca Maria Tavarelli, musics by Marco Betta, with Paola Cortellesi in the role of Maria Montessori, Italia, Universal Pictures, 2007.

³ Antonio Stoppani (1824-1891) was a geologist, a paleontologist and a patriot.

⁴ Stoppani is still famous in Italy not just for his scientific works, but mainly because his face is the logo of one of the most popular cheese in Italy, the *Bel Paese*, produced by Galbani.

this case, there could be a hiatus between the personal life of a scholar and his/her thought: the events of the life passes, thoughts could be perennial, especially if they are able to say something useful to humanhood, independently by the man or the woman who thought them. In the case of Maria Montessori, over all, she managed in order to a full reparation of her initial questionable behavior. Clarified this point, we are ready to see Montessori's landing to education.

In the Neuropsychiatric Department, she started to take care of disabled children, at that time called *not-normal* or *idiots*), understanding that they were in that condition because of the lack of adequate stimulations, and not by nature. She started to organize in a systematic way her ideas in papers presented to many conferences and symposia (Turin, 1898; Naples, 1920). She had also the opportunity to travel to London and Paris, where she had the opportunity to know the learning material invented and used by Itard⁵ and Séguin⁶ in order to re-educate the so called *phrenasthenics*. By means of observations and experiments, she was able to rehabilitate many of these children to a "normal" life. In the meanwhile, Guido Baccelli, the Minister of Education, charged her for the implementation of a class for the education of the phrenasthenics, and in 1900 a Master Orthophrenic School was implemented, and Maria Montessori was appointed as director, for the first 2 years.

In this moment of her life, her interests were not only scientific, but also cultural and political ones: for example, she represented Italy at the Feminist International Congresses of Berlin (1896) and London (1900), and she published the lucky pamphlet *The Female Question and The Congress of London* (1899).

In 1902 she and his mentor Montesano became members of the National Pedagogical Association, promoting a "scientific" approach to education both of disabled and "normal" children. In order to face the daedalian hank of educational questions, she widened her cultural background, studying (and graduating in) philosophy and anthropology. In this last subject in 1903 she was appointed "free professor", that means enabled to teach in the University, with a treatise who was published later as *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1910). Times were mature for an innovative educational experience.

1.3. Maria Montessori as a revolutionary educationist

At the beginning of the XX century, in Rome, the private company Roman Institute for Real Estates asked to Maria Montessori to set up something for the children living in the very overcrowded suburb of San Lorenzo (Saint Lawrence) where many poor people, after years spent in huts, were put in real houses, but in an area lacking any other social services. So, on the 6th of January 1907, the first "House of Children" (in Italian "Casa dei Bambini") was set up in Marsi Street, n. 58, for some dozens of children from 3 to 6 years.

By the motivational push of this experience, in 1909 Maria Montessori exposed her educational method in the book *The Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to Childhood Education in the Houses of Children*, who was immediately a best seller. When she arrived to the Unites States, in 1913, the newspaper

⁵ Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard (1775-1838) explored innovative methods of stimulating the senses of mental disabled children: he became famous when he tried to civilize the so called "wild boy of the Aveyron".

⁶ Edouard Séguin (1812-1880), connecting senses and intelligence, invented special learning materials in order to train mental disabled children.

“New York Tribune” defined her “the most interesting woman of Europe”, contributing to the diffusion of the method in the US.⁷

In 1916 she wrote *Self-education in the Elementary School*, in order to give some guidelines for the prosecution of her pedagogical ideas in the further step of schooling, the elementary school. While the Houses of Children were spreading all over the world, at the beginning of the Tens Montessori’s social engagement brought her to collaborate with the “Society of the Interest of Southern Italy”, founded by Pasquale Villari,⁸ and the “Humanitarian Society” of Milan. In order to promote her ideas and experiences, she started from 1913 a long chain of “International Courses for Teacher Training”.

In 1918 in Naples the “Society of Friends of the Montessori’s Method” was born: this society became the “Montessori National Opera” in 1924. It is very particular that a society, dedicated to someone, is set up when this someone is still living: it usually happens in rare occasions. In 1921, the *Handbook of Scientific Pedagogy* was published, becoming soon the handbook of a new conception of education.

In the meanwhile, the arising Fascism⁹ and the cultural influence of neo-idealistic philosophies, mainly promoted by Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce, started to push Maria Montessori at the border of the national system of education. Her humanitarian and pacifistic ideals were not in line with the authoritarian, nationalistic and paramilitaristic indoctrination implemented in schools of any grade by the Fascist regime. Fascism anyway tried to use her as a «gold medal» to exhibit in international context.

For many reasons (one was religious), the Ministry of National Education disregarded the «House of Children» and promoted the “Maternal School” and the pedagogical method of the Agazzi sisters (Rosa and Carolina), perceived as more flexible to fascist ideological goals. According to this new educational wind, for example, the “Master School Montessori”, born in August 1924 by a King Act, for the training of the teachers hired in the “Houses of Children”, was suppressed in the early Thirties.

It is interesting to note that Maria Montessori, starting from the book *Living Children in the Church* (1922), tried to change the image of her method, perceived in some conservative social environments as a-religious and not-value-oriented training technique. Therefore, she published also *The Life in Christ* (1931) and *The Holy Mass Explained to Children* (1949), and finally, for not being charged to minimize the role of the family, she wrote the *Child in the Family* (1936).

1.4. A star of educational philosophy exiled from her homeland

But any attempt to promote some kinds of education not oriented to indoctrination was not useful, so in 1934 Maria Montessori emigrated first to Spain, then in Great Britain and finally in India, where she was forced to stay just because of the beginning of the Second World War: the star of the new educational philosophy was not a prophet in her homeland.

⁷ After a reduction of interest in the midcentury, Maria Montessori became popular in the US by the foundation of the American Montessori Society, promoted by Nancy McCormick Rambush, in 1960.

⁸ Pasquale Villari (1827-1917) was a, Italian historian and a politician, very intrigued with the economical and social rise of the Southern Italy.

⁹ The task of making the government, mixed with conservatives and some fascist ministers, was given to Benito Mussolini in the October 1922, after the “march toward Rome”, but the fascist regime officially started on the 3rd of January 1925, after the murder of the Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti, some months before (with a famous speech of Benito Mussolini in the Italian Parliament («I could transform this grey room in a headquarter for soldiers ...»)).

In India, she and her son Mario founded many educational institutions and directed many teacher training courses. In this period, she also revised (or started to write really) her philosophy of education: in 1949 she published *Peace Education*, *The Education of Man* and *The Absorbing Mind* (translated in Italian as *The Mind of The Child*, 1952); in 1950 *The Secret of Childhood* (published for the first time in Switzerland, 1938), *The Discovery of Child* (a new edition of *The Method of Scientific Pedagogy ...* of 1909) and *Education to Freedom*.

She was now very famous all over the world, but not in Italy, where the post-war times were still not in favor of her method. She lived for sometime in India again, and held the Netherlands as a new homeland, mainly for rest. There she died, at Noordwijk an See, on the 6th of May 1952. On his gravestone it is written:

“I pray my beloved children, just because they can all, to join me in order to construct the peace in humans and in the world”

Even if Montessori’s theories and practices were and are often criticized, I think no one of us could be in disagreement with this minimal program.

Many books were published and known in Italy after her passing: in 1970 *From Childhood to Adolescence* (conferences held in London in 1938), *To Educate the Human Potential* (conferences held in Madras in 1943) and *Education for a New World* (conferences held in India in 1943); in 1971 *Psycho-Arythmetics. Arythmetics Developed According to the Guidelines of Childhood Psychology During 25 Years of Experiences* (first published in Spanish in 1934).

Maria Montessori was appreciated by many scholars and “cosmic historical individuals”, hegelianly speaking, from Mahatma Gandhi to Sigmund Freud, from Rabindranath Tagore to Guglielmo Marconi, from Jean Piaget to Thomas Alva Edison, from William H. Kilpatrick to Helene Parkhurst. Of course, he was also criticized, especially by philosophers of education, for example by Sergej Hessen, by John Dewey, by the most part of the Catholic educationists, by Édouard Claparède, by Ovide Decroly, as a witness of critical interest in front of one of the hugest efforts to re-think early childhood education in the first part of XX century.

1.5. Maria Montessori after Maria Montessori

The Montessori National Opera is still the organization devoted to promote the Montessorian educational method and philosophy of early childhood education. One of the most famous follower and interpreter of Maria Montessori’s spirit is Grazia Honegger Fresco, editor of many Montessorian works and author herself of many essays adjusting the method to the new challenges of contemporary education.¹⁰

Many aspects of Maria Montessori’s insights about early childhood education are still explored, like the so called “Environmental Education”. Recently, some essays, like *Discovering flowers and vegetables in the garden with Maria Montessori. Environmental education for very young children* (2010), are recalling

¹⁰ G. Honegger Fresco, *Maria Montessori: una storia attuale (Maria Montessori: a up-to-date history)* Napoli – Roma, L’ancora del mediterraneo, 2008; G. Honegger Fresco (ed.), *Montessori: perchè no? Una pedagogia per la crescita: che cosa ne è oggi della proposta pedagogica di Maria Montessori in Italia e nel mondo? (Montessori: why not? A pedagogy for growth: what remains today of the pedagogical proposal of Maria Montessori in Italy and in the world?)*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2000.

Maria Montessori's ideas to use gardens in order to educate young children to the love for Nature and natural beings.

Conclusion

At the present moment, while we are reading this slide, there are 22.000 Montessorian schools all over the world, and her books are translated in more than 30 languages. Montessorian Training Centers (for example at Bergamo, Northern Italy) still prepare the "humble" teachers required for the "Houses of Children" in the globalized world, in the spirit of the founder:

"So we will find in front of the child not considered anymore a being without force, an empty bowl to fill with our wisdom; but his/her dignity will arise just in front of our eyes, if we will be able to see him/her as the builder of our intelligence, as the being that, lead by an internal master, works in order to construct that marvelous thing of nature that is Humanhood".

At the light of this pedagogical spirit, it's now time to focus about her educational project for young children.

2. MARIA MONTESSORI: HER EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Premise

As we have seen above, Maria Montessori could be considered an icon of the rights of women, for example because she was the first woman to be authorized to work as a doctor in Italy. Better known (and appreciated) abroad rather than in Italy, for the reasons we mentioned, she wrote dozens of books, translated in many languages all over the world, used as handbooks of early childhood education in thousands of "House of the Children" widespread all over the world. It is now the moment to examine her educational philosophy and her pedagogical approach.¹¹

2.1. From psychology to pedagogy

At the beginning of her career, Maria Montessori, as one of the best product of the positivistic idea of science, is still linked to the idea that a "scientific" psychology has to be the base for pedagogy. At that time, the track to science for psychology was to become psychophysiology, characterized by the claim to measure the so called "objective data", like the natural sciences, but it is not able to promote a new education. If education wants to be "scientific", too, it cannot be based on this kind of data, upon which it is impossible to found a practice able to modify personality, which is the goal of pedagogy.

So, first of all, in a scientific approach to education, a scientific observation of the subject (in this case, the child) is needed, but Maria Montessori alerts us, because what we observe is not the real child, but the image of child coming out by wrong educational practices, based on adult prejudicial image of childhood. This is the first step of the Montessorian approach to early childhood education.

¹¹ Montessorian sources of this part are *The secret of childhood*, translated and edited by Barbara Barclay Carter, London, Sangam Books, 1983; *The absorbent mind*, with a new foreword by John Chattin-McNichols, New York, Henry Holt, 1995; M. Montessori, *The Montessori method*, introduction by J. McV.Hunt, with a new introduction by Jaan Valsiner, New Brunswick (U.S.A.), Transaction Publishers, 2014. One of the most recent monography about Montessori's educational philosophy is M. O'Donnell, *Maria Montessori: a critical introduction to key themes and debates*, London - New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

Pedagogy does not need either a “school child”, who is “deviated”, according to their Montessorian perspective, or a “laboratory child”, who is an abstract creation, a mere concept, but a “real child”, who has to be still discovered. The child we see is a child whose vital energies were suppressed by wrong practices, and this happens in the family, in the school, in the society.

So, the task to build a new education is not to be pursued through the psychological science, but through the implementation of a new educational environment, coming out after a sort of Copernican revolution: and just because the most part of educational processes happen in the schools, we need a new school environment.

This is what Maria Montessori calls “normalization” of the child, which is a process of freedom: on the contrary of the usual meaning of the word, which has a negative connotation, recalling an idea of imprisoning creativity, according to Maria Montessori the “normal” children have to be constructed making them free from wrong practices, founded on educational prejudices of pedagogical fallacies traded by generations.

An enforcement of her heterodox ideas came, as we have already seen, from the French scholars Itard (1775-1838) and Séguin (1812-1880), who were able to educate disabled children non only observing them, but also modifying their personalities, their real and material approach to life. For doing this, they had to create accurate and progressive methods of educational intervention, both practices and tools.

Starting from this point of view, Maria Montessori, having reached good result in educating real and/or supposed disabled children, thought that if something, educationally speaking, works with disabled children, it will work also with the other children, presumed to be “normal”, who on the contrary are “deviated”.

2.2. Psychological development and self-education

It is really strange that Maria Montessori arrived so late in systematizing her philosophy of education (*The Secret of Childhood*, 1938; *The Mind of the Child*, 1949): her practical method, her pedagogy, comes first than theory or, better, she had some psychopedagogical insights, theoretically not yet fully grounded, upon which she build up a pedagogical practice, which at the end was re-written as a philosophy of education in her latest works.

As we have seen, her track starts from her first sense-oriented practices to a new and more complex framework of educational tasks for children: the psychological profile of the Montessorian child is the opposite of the common-view child: to play, to imagine, to pretend everything, noisy, to be strongly guided with awards and punishments. These are not “natural” characteristics of the spontaneous child, but deviated behaviors or attitudes instilled by wrong practices and beliefs.

In the right school environment, that is the “House of Children”,¹² the child is concentrated, self-disciplined, quiet, oriented to finish tasks: the right environment lets the real child coming out, the good stimulations let the child stop to be a “secret”, according to another famous educational metaphor used by Montessori.

According to Maria Montessori’s pedagogical discourse, the real child is a “spiritual embryo”: like a cellular, the child has full potential attitudes which has to be developed through a correct educational track.

¹² The use of the plural is to focus the attention of teachers and educators about the real many existing children, rather than promoting the idea of one child, scientifically described in the psychological handbooks.

This is a very controversial notion, and many of the criticisms to Montessori dealt with the use of not scientific concepts in order to found a scientific education. Anyway, Maria Montessori depicts a child as the constructor of himself/herself, developing from an original vital energy his/her peculiar attitudes.

Further, Maria Montessori uses the astronomical concept of “nebula” as a metaphor in order to define an indistinct center of activities, which helps the spiritual embryo (the child) to grow up: the vital energy of the spiritual embryo comes to the so called “incarnation”, which is the full development of what is only potential. So, a “nebula” is the language, or the learning of behaving in the society, and so on. These “nebulas” are to be educated at the right age, in the preschool years, from 0 to 6: it is not a choice, but a necessity shown by the scientific knowledge of the child psychology.

“Sensitive period” is a concept taken from the Dutch scholar Hugo De Vries:¹³ there are, in the child development, periods chronologically disposed in which it is important to cultivate a specific area of development: if you waste time, for example in a traditional school based on drill exercises or corporal punishment, the period is lost and the risk is to compromise the development of children.

In the first years of human life (0-3), the principle regulating the spiritual embryo’s activities, transversal to the forms and rhythms of development, is the trend of unconscious absorption of data: the child’s mind absorbs data but in a creative and peculiar way. The “absorbing mind”, a concept developed by Maria Montessori starting from the Thirties, is the matrix of further learning.

2.3. The method: normalization and sensorial development

Coming to the famous “Montessorian method”, we note that this is supposed to work for children going out from the time of the “absorbing mind”, when they need that their “mathematical mind” is cultivated, that is the preschool time (3-6 years).¹⁴

The method is based on 3 pillars: the special environment of the House of Children, the special learning materials, the special “humble” teacher.

If in the phase of the “absorbing mind” learning is living, because the child unconsciously learns how to adapt himself/herself to the social environment, in the phase of the “mathematical mind” learning is the effect of a more and more conscious selection of the existential data accumulated during the first years of life. Learning materials are therefore “generalized abstractions”, helping the child in mediating child’s knowledge with the environment.

The “normal” childhood education has to be implemented in a “normal” childhood school . Maria Montessori strongly believes that children coming to the childhood school are subjects deviated by wrong practices in the family and in the social environment: they are “broken children”, prisoner of forms of deviations such as playing, storytelling, imagination, trend to possess and power, laziness and fear of everything. Children need to become “normal” by means of a special environment and training: in this way, child’s peculiar characteristics will emerge: repeating and completing exercises, concentrating on the chosen materials, accepting hard work in order to solve problems.

¹³ Hugo De Vries (1848.1935) was a Dutch botanist and geneticist, which developed a mutation theory of evolution in parallel with Gregor Mendel.

¹⁴ A critical discussion about the role of mathematics in the Montessorian perspective is available in M. Duffy, *Math works: Montessori math and the developing brain*, Santa Rosa – CA, Parent Child Press, 2014 (2).

This educational environment, set up in the Houses of Children, is a sort of “didactical clinic”: it is impossible to have an effective method without a special environment, helping the normalization of children and promoting their natural and creative development. In Montessori’s words, “There is a hidden child, an unknown child, a segregated living entity who has to be free”.

Environment means the material structure of the school, the scientific material, the practical activities of a “house” and the new role of the teacher. First of all, the school is a “house”, which means a friendly and protective environment. Second, the house is “of the children”, and not “for children”, which means a place where children are not temporary hosts, but real livers “feeling at home”. Third, this is the reason why everything is sized upon the children’s size: only respecting this proportions, it will be possible for children to live in the house in autonomy and collaboration. This should be impossible in a traditional school with adult furniture adapted to children.

In this newly thought environment, the “material for development” is not the effect of the method, but its pre-condition. Materials isolate only 1 quality (form, color, weight, sound ...): using the material, children have to be able to control and correct their mistakes in autonomy (and in loneliness), to have an aesthetic experience, to be active and to be concentrated on one task at a time.¹⁵ The activities with this materials were charged to be too analytical, and this is the reason why Maria Montessori never thought that they should exhaust the entire educational enterprise.

There are many other practical activities, typical of a house and, of course, of the House of Children, such as keeping order, keeping clean, preparing the meals, gardening and so on: they are privileged forms of complex and synthetic activities, in which children could insert the analytical abilities learnt during the individual use of the materials.

Both the analytical and the synthetic activities are supervised and tutored by teachers, but not acting like traditional teachers, such as explaining contents and listening to repetitions. The first quality for the Montessorian teacher, who is the hero (the heroine, to tell the truth) of a new educational enterprise, is “humbleness”, which means to respect the progressive child development, checking it carefully and helping the children to reach their own outcomes. “Humble” teachers organize the environment, show the children the correct use of learning materials, take note of the individual behaviors: they are not anymore “almighty teachers”, caricatures and parodies of the traditional teachers, but facilitators of learning. Of course, these teachers need a specific training program, which was developed by the many training centers set up by Maria and Mario Montessori along their life.

Conclusion

“I pray my beloved children, just because they can all, to join me in order to construct the peace in humans and in the world”

As you remember, this is the epitaph of Maria Montessori: in it, all the ingredients of her philosophy of education are synthetically contained: the love for children as the base for any educational on-field work, the discovered children, education as a cooperative and collective enterprise, the peace as the first and last goal of any educational event. Montessori’s theories and practices were and are often criticized, but all of these points are stated, with different words, in the essays and handbooks of many of her critics, Loris

¹⁵ A book illustrating a contemporary Montessorian approach to geography is B. George – J. George – A. Nassner, *Montessori: map work*, New York - NY, Abrams Books, 2014.

Malaguzzi included, whose life, works and educational philosophy we will examine in the following part of this essay.

3. LORIS MALAGUZZI. HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Premise

Loris Malaguzzi's life, as Maria Montessori's life, is a life devoted to the education of children: it will be interesting to discover how Malaguzzi's vocation to the profession of educator came out, on the contrary of the scholar of Chiaravalle, from fortuitous circumstances rather than planned choices of life.

3.1. Loris Malaguzzi when he was a child, a boy, a young adult

Loris Malaguzzi¹⁶ was born in Correggio, a small town nearby Reggio Emilia, on the 23rd of February 1920. In 1923, his family went to live in Fiume Square, in the center of Reggio Emilia, but in 1929 the Malaguzzi family moved to Zappello Street, in the area of Santa Croce ("Holy Cross"), in the northern part of the town, nearby the factory "Officine Reggiane" and the railway station. In that year, Loris Malaguzzi was enrolled in the Institute for Teacher Training "Princess of Naples", and he studied there for 7 years, 4 of primary course and 3 of secondary one.

In the school year 1938-39, he was appointed substitute teacher at Reggiolo, a village nearby the Po river, in the flat area of the province. In the school years 1940-1942, he was appointed substitute teacher at Sologno, a small village in the municipality of Villa Minozzo, in the Appennino Mountains. The 10th of December 1940, with his friend Sergio Masini, he decided to be enrolled in the Faculty of Teacher Training at the University of Urbino, because that was the only university site permitting to be enrolled without attending the classes.

In the school year 1943-1944, Malaguzzi was sent first to the elementary school of Guasco Street, and then he was compulsorily enrolled in the Army of the Italian Social Republic, the State set up by the Germans after the armistice of the 8th of September 1943. He was assigned in the railway military services, in a headquarter at Bologna: after a night bombing of the town, he came back to Reggio, without adhering neither to the Republican Fascist Party nor to the units of the so called "Resistance".

In the school year 1944-1945 he went back to teach, and since 1947 he taught in a junior high school at Giuastalla, the main center of the flat part of the province of Reggio Emilia. On the 31st of December 1944, he married Nilde Bonacini.

3.2. Searching for the right job

In May 1945, people started to build a kindergarten at Villa Cella, in the suburb of Reggio Emilia: Malaguzzi went to see riding a bicycle and was enrolled as a voluntary teacher. The school will be opened on 13th of January 1947.

¹⁶ Sources for this part are A. Hoyuelos Planillo, *Loris Malaguzzi: biografia pedagogica (Loris Malaguzzi: Pedagogical biography)*, Azzano San Paolo (BG), Junior, 2004; P. Zanetti, *I servizi educativi prescolastici a Reggio Emilia: le scuole dell'infanzia e le colonie estive (Preschool Educational Services at Reggio Emilia: Kindergartens and Summer "Colonie")*, Padova, CLEUP, 2011; P. V. Pignataro, *La pedagogia relazionale di Loris Malaguzzi (The Relational Pedagogy of Loris Malaguzzi)*, Padova, CLEUP, 2014. Most of them are not translated in English.

On the 7th of July 1946, Malaguzzi was graduated in Pedagogy, discussing a dissertation about Johann Gottlieb Fichte's educational philosophy. In that year, he was also appointed director of the school for veterans at Rivalentella, nearby Reggio Emilia.

In 1947, with a very serious decision, Malaguzzi left the job of teacher in the State schools and started to find his professional career elsewhere. Enrolled in the Italian Communist Party after the end of the war, in the years 1947-1951 he works as a journalist for some local newspapers; starting from 1951, he organized some theatre festivals, for adults and for children.

On the 12th of January 1949, Malaguzzi wrote to the famous educationist Ernesto Codignola, living at Florence, for joining the schools he was managing to the International Federation of Youth Communities.

3.3. The right job: director of educational institutions

Starting from January 1951, for six months, Malaguzzi attended a master class in psychology of education, held in Rome by the National Center of Researches. It was a very pioneeristic experience and the real turn of Malaguzzi's life. The director of the master class asked to Malaguzzi to remain at Rome as assistant, but he preferred to go back to Reggio Emilia, where, in June 1951, he was appointed director of the Medical-Psycho-Pedagogical (MPP) Center by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia.

From 1951 to 1966, Malaguzzi was the director of the MPP Center, helping families at risk or with disabled children, starting to disseminate the activity of the center and his team. For example, on the 25th of March 1953, by his impulse, the Municipality of Reggio Emilia organized an International Exhibition of Children's Drawings. In 1958, and since 1966, Malaguzzi was also appointed director of another school for disabled children, dedicated to "Giuseppe Lombardo Radice", a famous Italian educator, the main collaborator of the philosopher of education Giovanni Gentile, who was the Minister of Public Education during the first Mussolini government (1921-1923).

Another important event for Malaguzzi's professional happened in 1960, when the Municipality of Reggio Emilia built the "colonia" (summer camp) of Cesenatico, nearby Rimini, on the Adriatic Sea: 2 years after Malaguzzi was appointed director of the "colonia" of Igea Marina, nearby Rimini too, run by the United Municipalities of the Province of Reggio Emilia. In this period, he was still very intrigued with psychological interests: in March-April 1962, he organized a Symposium about the relationship among psychiatry, psychology and pedagogy.

The educational works developed both in the MPP and in the "colonia" was very important in order to set up the municipal engagement in the early childhood education, traditionally managed by private institutions, most of them Catholic. On the 5th of November 1962, after a long struggle against the conservative political forces and the State administration, the Municipality of Reggio Emilia opened the first municipal kindergarten, called "Robinson", for 3-to-6-year children, and Malaguzzi was appointed pedagogical coordinator of this experience.

3.4. The growth of a municipal school system of early childhood education at Reggio Emilia

One year after, on the 11th of September 1963, a Municipal Commission was formed in order to study the opening of the first municipal "asilo nido" (infant toddler center), an educational institution for 0-to-3-year, whose real implementation happened in 1971.

In 1964, he was also appointed director of the “colonia” of Cesenatico, that first of all he renamed “Casa di Vacanze” (House of Vacations), to mark the substantial difference between the past and the present, as we will see in the following part of this text concerning Malaguzzi. In the meanwhile, the 9th of November 1964, the second municipal kindergarten “Anna Frank” was opened, starting to build up a municipal system of early childhood education.

In May 1965, Malaguzzi and some collaborators went to visit to the University of Geneva (Switzerland), the cathedral of the Piaget-oriented early childhood education. Partly linked to this experience of opening the mind, in November 1965, the first “Pedagogical November” was set up, a meeting about educational questions and problems, both local and general. Starting from 1966, many educational experiences were set up in the municipal kindergartens, starting from the needs of the children and the interaction of them with the teachers and the parents. On the 2nd of October 1967, the historical kindergarten (formally a private school) of Villa Cella became a municipal school .

In the years 1968-1974, Malaguzzi was also appointed pedagogical counsellor of the municipal kindergartens of Modena, but the experience stopped roughly after 6 years, when the Municipality accepted the nationalization of some municipal schools, in order to gain money to front some budget cuts. So Malaguzzi focused his educational work only towards the Reggio institutions: for example, in these years he had the idea to hire some experts of a pedagogical use of fine arts, that were called “atelieristi” (*atelier* means workshop in French).

On February 1970, the municipal kindergarten “Diana” was opened, in the centre of Reggio Emilia. In that year, a 5-year municipal program of development was prepared, with the goal of reaching 20 municipal kindergartens. Diana was a young girl met by Malaguzzi in the elementary school of Sologno, at the beginning of his career. On the 2nd of July 1970, the first general meeting of the committees “The school and the city” was set up, in order to improve the participation of the families to the management of the municipal schools. These committees (mixed assemblies of teachers and parents) were set up in order to manage each single school, from the enrollment to the pedagogical guidelines to follow.

3.5. The development of a municipal school system of early childhood education

In the days 18-19-20 March 1971, Malaguzzi and his team organized the national symposium “Experiences for a new kindergarten”: 100 people were expected, but 1000 were the real participants, so the meeting was held in the Municipal Theatre (now dedicated to the actor Romolo Valli). This is one of the best indicators of the interest provoked by the Reggio experiences, then well known as “Reggio Approach”.

On the 15th of December 1971, 15 days before the promulgation of the national act regulating the question, the first infant toddler center (“asilo nido”) was opened, dedicated to Genoeffa Cervi, the mother of 7 brothers killed by the Fascists in 1944. According to the national act n. 1044, 31st of December 1971, the State had the task to provide funds, the Regions had to supervise the general aspects of organization and the Municipalities had to build and manage the new institutions for children from 3 to 36 months.

From 6 to 10 March 1972, Gianni Rodari, the famous writer for children, was at Reggio Emilia, meeting children teachers, parents, administrators and citizens. After this experience, he will dedicated his book *La grammatica della fantasia (The Grammar of Fantasy)* to the town of Reggio Emilia. 2 months after, on the 30th of May, the Municipal Council approved the *Rules for the Management of the Municipal Kindergartens*, and 2 important meetings were held on the 22nd and 29th of August 1972, for the explanations of the *Rules* to the whole personnel of the municipal schools. At the end of this years, in November, some critiques to

the *Rules* were moved by the catholic educationist Luciano Corradini, professor of education in many Italian universities, who complained the absence of religion in the school activities, the bureaucratization of the social management and the lack of didactical freedom. Malaguzzi and his team answered that the municipal school is neutral about the issue of religion (whose education is a task of the family), that councils were the expression of a democratic approach to the school management and the didactical approach is discussed by the teachers all together, in order to realize common projects.

In 1973, some events for helping the Vietnamese children were organized in the municipal schools: as easily imaginable, this idea was criticized by the conservative forces. At the end of this school year, on the 20th of June, Malaguzzi and his team, following an idea of the group of the “atelieristi”, organized a school trip to San Polo d’Enza, a small town nearby Reggio, for 1500 children, parents and educators.

In 1974, Malaguzzi and the whole municipal school system were very active in the defense of the idea of a public early childhood education, attacked by many conservative forces. In 1975, the second infant toddler center was opened, dedicated to Pablo Picasso. In the school year 1975-1976, some infant toddlers centers still managed by the OMNI (National Organization for Children and Mothers, set up by the Fascism in 1925 and survived to it after the II World War), following the new trends inaugurated by the Act 1044, became municipal. On the 29th of September 1976, another infant toddler center, called “Sole” (Sun), was opened: for the first time, an educational institution for small children, earlier hosted in building recycled from other uses, was projected and built with the cooperation of educators and architects.

The track of pedagogical success of the Reggio Approach was full of traps: for an entire week, from the 11th to the 16th of November 1976, Gustavo Selva, the director of the GR2 (the news program of the national channel Radio 2, a conservative-oriented network), attacked the Reggio Emilia municipal school system, without any possibility to debate during the transmissions: one of the main issues was the presumed ideological indoctrination” of the children, performed by a group of “Communist” teachers. The next year, Malaguzzi and his team organized an answer, both political and pedagogical, in the form of a general meeting about *Religious education and early childhood education*.

In the 1st of October 1976, the first number of the magazine “Bambini” (Children), published by the company Fabbri Editori,¹⁷ owned by the Agnelli family, was printed: Malaguzzi was the director of the enterprise. This review was the only not religious voice in the field of early childhood education in Italy, together with “Infanzia” (Childhood), edited by scholars linked to the University of Bologna like Piero Bertolini and Franco Frabboni.

In the school year 1976-1977 many pedagogical projects were set up in the schools: the compass, playing with the water and the air, the ant, the snail, all of them starting from the real questions posed by children. In the days 3-18 December 1977, the photographic exhibition *Experiences and Researches of Children: discovering themselves and the world* was set up: pictures were used as a communicational tool in order to show the educational works of the Reggio Approach.

In the days 10-11 July 1978, a special seminar *Observations at the nido* was set up. In the school year 1978-1979, a great program of in-service training was organized, in order to face questions like general education, section meetings, adult-child relationship, child health, meals, family and children, from the infant toddler center to the kindergarten, the role of the *atelierista*, children’s language, children’s relationships with everybody, change in families, children’s identity.

¹⁷ The magazine is still living, published by Edizioni Junior, Bergamo.

On the 9th of August 1978, the national act n. 463 was promulgated in order to renew the kindergarten's organization and pedagogy; in that act, the idea of an academic training for the educators of kindergarten was suggested (it happened in 1998), and Malaguzzi and his team were in full agreement with this perspective. At the end of 1979, the pedagogical project "To make the portrait of a lion" was set up, starting from the special emotional link between the Reggio Emilia's children and the marble lions in front of the church of Saint Prosper, the patron of the city. Some years later, in June 1987, a video was made in order to provide a documentation of the experience: it was the first time for a documentation through this new *medium*, whose Malaguzzi was a real fan.

In January 1980, Malaguzzi wanted to promote some reflections with the *atelieristi* about the Gestalt approach in order to give value to visual languages. In the days 16-17 May 1980, a national conference about *Asili nido 80* was held. Starting from this experience, and 9 years after the Act 1044, the birth of the "Gruppo Nazionale Asili Nido" (National Group for Infant Toddler Centers, today National Group Infant Toddler Centers-Childhood) was promoted, in order to give answers to social questions and developing researches and experimental approaches to the management of the *nido*, whose implementation was not uniform in Italy both for quantity and quality. In December, some meetings with parents about *Seeing hands and working eyes* were set up: this title shows perfectly his idea of engaging parents and not only teachers and educators in a new pedagogical enterprise.

3.6. The widespread of a new idea of early childhood education

In the days 6-31 May 1981, the first version of the exhibition *L'occhio se salta il muro (The eye if it jumps the wall)* was set up in the center of Reggio Emilia. The moviemaker Carlo Barsotti and his wife Anna, educationist, visited the exhibition: they lived in Sweden, and asked to Malaguzzi to show the exhibition in Stockholm. A lot of work was done and the exhibition went to Sweden, but in the meanwhile many others cities asked for the exhibition (Barcelona, Madrid, Palma de Mallorca, Berlin). This was the real communicational jump for the Reggio Approach.

In the next years, many activities were set up, both local and national. On March 1982, there was a seminar about *Asili nido and kindergarten: participation and social management as a pedagogical and cultural project*, focused about the strict link between the ages 0-3 and 3-6, and on the need to share a pedagogical vision with many actors (mainly parents, but also citizens). In 11-12-13 November 1982 a conference in memory of Gianni Rodari's visit to Reggio was set up. In the school year 1982-1983 some mixed commissions (composed by parents, citizens and personnel) discussed about didactics, educational environment and relationship with the external environment. In January 1983, Malaguzzi suggested to his team to reflect about the issue of self-identity, and in 24-27 March 1983 a national conference about the infant toddler center (*nido*) was organized: *New conceptions for the infant toddler center and the early childhood institutions in a society in crisis and forced to change?* 13 years after the implementation of the Act 1044, the age 0-3 was still not fully considered an age to take care with pedagogical projects. In April-May 1983 there was a strong mobilization against the governmental proposal of anticipation at 5 years of the elementary, because this proposal was not supported by educational reasons, but only by socioeconomical ones.

In 1984, the exhibition *L'occhio se salta il muro* arrived at Barcelona, and new strong relationships were established with Spanish schools and educators. On 31 May – 1-2 June 1984, a national conference was held in Reggio Emilia, *To stay with the children. The knowledge of educators*, in order to show the attention of Malaguzzi and his team to the teachers training. In the same year, an important project was set up with Coop Italia, a popular cooperative enterprise, whose supermarket are widespread all over the

country. *The Coop* was the title of the project managed by the kindergarten “Villetta”, and the subtitle, *We children and he Gulliver*, was the expression of the perception of the children about that place where families spent a lot of time to buy food. At the end of 1984, another project about *Long jump*, managed by the kindergarten “Diana”, started after some insights of the children, generating a long discussion about the approach to mathematical teaching and learning-

In January – March 1985, the exhibition *L’occhio se salta il muro* reached Palma de Mallorca and Madrid. On 29 May – 1-2-3- June 1985, an international conference was organized at Reggio Emilia: *Experiences and problems. Theoretical and practical models and hypothesis in early childhood education*. As we can easily see by the title, the idea was to treat ECE as a scientific object, and not a simple pedagogical practice, set up always and anyway. In the same year, a pioneeristic reflection about children and computer sciences and technologies started: *Approaches to the future. The intelligences of children and the intelligences of the computers*. Malaguzzi and his team did not see the “computer” as the devil or as the only possible tool for future education, but something to be explored starting from the perceptions children had of it.

At the end of 1985, Malaguzzi was 65 years old and he had to retire from his official municipal job: he worked for some years as pedagogical counselor. Sergio Spaggiari became director of the Municipal School and Carla Rinaldi was appointed coordinator of the pedagogical supervisors.

3.7. The nostalgia for the future

In 1986, going to Berlin, the exhibition *L’occhio se salta il muro* changed its name (it was not politically correct to go to Berlin talking about a “wall”) and widespread its contents, becoming *The 100 languages of children*, that became and still is a sort of pedagogical slogan for the Reggio Approach. In this year, the neverending question of teaching Catholic religion in the kindergarten was debated (Malaguzzi was always in favor of talking about the religious insights of the children, never with its “teaching”, in any form), some international relationships (Pamplona, Stockholm) were strengthened, the pedagogical project *The town and the rain* was launched.

In March 1987, in the seminar *You have to become a parent*, Malaguzzi talked about the role of the television, another critical issue: television, as the “computer”, was alternatively exalted or demonized, and he wanted to talk about it from a pedagogical point of view, starting from the children’s experiences of this box full of colored images, at that time becoming a new nanny for many children. In this year, for the first time, the Municipality, unable to front the huge demand of educational services (especially the *nido*) gave to some cooperative enterprises (Coopselios and SILA) the task to set up 2 infant toddler centers, after a mutual agreement about the quality of the service.

In 1988, many other the pedagogical projects were set up under Malaguzzi’s supervision: about the shadow (*Everybody has a shadow except ants*, ended in 1990), about the rainbow, about *The very little children of the silent cinema*: after the computer and the television, now was the turn of the movies, to be challenged in their pedagogical implications.

In 1989-1990, all the municipalities had to face the problem of the reduction of State funding and the consequent nationalization of many municipal schools (not at Reggio Emilia). In 1991, the new *National Guidelines for Kindergarten* were approved by the Ministry of Public Education, and Malaguzzi gave a personal version of them:

“1. learning the desire of waiting and of international exchange / 2. learning to communicate and to increase the synchronization of communicational codes / 3. learning to express loves, feelings, desires / 4. discovering how friendship is beautiful / 5. learning to talk and discuss with him-herself / 6. learning the laws of listening / 7. to see, to feel, to express, to know with the body / [other 35 points skipped] / 43. to express gratefulness to the teachers for having offered situations of deepening and for having shared resources, consciousness and knowledge (in Italian “*coscienza e conoscenza*”).”

1989 is also important because in this year the Centre of Documentation and Educational Research was born, as a special branch of the system, devoted to preserve the documentation (oral, written, visual) of the pedagogical activities and to promote further researches and discussions. The Centre is still operating in the “Loris Malaguzzi International Center”.

In 28-31 March 1990, the international conference *Who am I? Tell me first this! (Alice in Wonderland) A Comparison among knowing in order to grant citizenship to the rights and the potentialities of children and adults* saw the coming of 1700 participants, from all over the world. In September – October 1990, some interviews were delivered in order to edit a book about the “Reggio Approach”, critically showing theories and practices and not establishing a “method” from above.

The years from 1991 to 1993 were full of work and also of satisfaction for Loris Malaguzzi. In Autumn 1991, the pedagogical project *The shoe and the meter, started from the discussion of a group of children about the construction of a wooden table*, was presented in Paris. On 2 December 1991, the U.S. magazine “Newsweek” states that the kindergarten “Diana” was the best in the world: this event was the beginning of an uninterrupted flow of pedagogical tourism to Reggio Emilia. Just because a procession of delegations coming from all over the world started to visit Reggio Emilia, in order to worship the “sanctuary” of a new approach to early childhood education, Malaguzzi had the first idea to constitute an organization devoted to this task: this organization was Reggio Children, born in 1994, whose first Constitution was drafted by Elena Poppi, a young administrative officer of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. In 1992, Malaguzzi was the pedagogical counselor of his last pedagogical project: *The amusements’ park for birds*. On 11 November 1992: Malaguzzi received the LEGO Award In Kobenhaven (Denmark) and in June 1993 the Kohl Foundation Award in Chicago (U.S.).¹⁸ On 8 October 1993, Malaguzzi launched a call for delivering the Nobel Prize for Peace to the besieged children of Sarajevo.

On Thursday 27 January 1994, Malaguzzi was engaged in his last pedagogical event, a meeting with the Pedagogical coordinators and the personnel of the municipal infant toddler centers and kindergartens: he asked for a reflections about the internal organization of the educational system, where adults had to be a *place* where children could exercise their skills of projecting something always new. On Saturday 29 January, Malaguzzi had a dinner with his beloved friends of an entire life; they talked about politics and he anticipated to them the idea to go to San Francisco, in the program of a critical widespread availability the Reggio Approach.

Conclusion

¹⁸ Coming back from Chicago, June 1993, Loris Malaguzzi met Elena Poppi, Nicola Barbieri’s wife, at the New York Airport. She talked to him about her husband, who was completing a 1-year-program of doctoral studies in education at the University of California at Los Angeles. Malaguzzi said to her to tell her husband to go for a conversation with him, after his coming back to Italy. This conversation, for many reasons, never happened. The present reconstruction of Loris Malaguzzi’s life and thought is a sort of late reparation of that missed conversation.

During the morning of Sunday 31 January 1994, Loris Malaguzzi was reading a book about the German painter Paul Klee and started to feel bad: at 14.30 he died for a heart attack. His coffin is put in the Hall of the Tricolor, where the Municipal Council keeps its meetings (and where he showed the movies about the Houses of Vacations, in the Sixties ...). At the end of February 1994, some friends (among them Alfredo Hoyuelos Planillo, the author of the only biography existing about Loris Malaguzzi), received a letter, dated 26 January 1994, in which Loris Malaguzzi highlighted his spiritual and pedagogical heritage:

“ ... and let the children always give form to things, rather than things give form to children!”

4. LORIS MALAGUZZI: HIS EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Premise

Twenty-one years ago, the 30th of January 1994, Loris Malaguzzi, the founder and the inspirer of the Municipal system of early childhood education in Reggio Emilia, died. As we have seen above, his life and his actions were totally devoted to children and to their care and education: most quoted and evocated than seriously studied, Malaguzzi risks to remain a pedagogical mystery. In this part, I should like to pinpoint the main features of Loris Malaguzzi's educational proposal, looking at him as an educator, as a decision-maker and an implicit philosopher of education.¹⁹

4.1. Loris Malaguzzi's educational perspective in his first professional experiences

As we know, Loris Malaguzzi did not choose a high school for elementary school teacher according to a particular feeling or an individual determination, but it was a choice of his father, who was a railroad man, because he wanted for his son a short study track (non academic, outside of the familiar possibilities), but at the same time a jump in the social scale, because to be an elementary school teacher, at that time, was a very prestigious job.

Become an elementary school teacher just at the beginning of the Second World War, as many young teachers, Malaguzzi did not find a job in the school of the city, because the only free places were in the countryside.

4.1.1. The elementary school teaching at Sologno

While the war was going on, Malaguzzi was a young man sent to teach in Sologno, a very small village in the mountains, in the southern part of the province of Reggio Emilia: it was for him a sort or ritual of initiation, anthropologically speaking. Let us hear his own words recalling that experience:

“Up there, at 800 meters of altitude, for two years, I learnt a lot: the art of foot walking, of orienteering with trees and rocks, to distinguish right and bad tracks, to cross rivers, to discover the abundance of chestnut trees, the friendship of silences. I learnt to be a real friend for 15 children

¹⁹ Sources for this part are C. Edwards - L. Gandini - G. Forman (eds), *Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*, Azzano San Paolo (BG), Junior, 2006 (2nd edition); K. Hall et al., *Loris Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia experience*, London – New York, Continuum, 2010; G. Aldi, et al., *Un'altra scuola è possibile: le grandi pedagogie olistiche di Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Steiner, Sai Baba, Malaguzzi, Milani, Lodi, Krishnamurti, Gardner (Another School is Possible: the Great Holistic Philosophies of Education by Rousseau, ... Malaguzzi ...Gardner)*, Milano, Enea, 2013; Alfredo Hoyuelos Planillo, *Il soggetto bambino: l'etica pedagogica di Loris Malaguzzi (The Child as a Subject: the Pedagogical Ethics of Loris Malaguzzi)*, Parma, Junior – Spaggiari, 2014. Except the first collection of essays, the others are not translated in English.

walking with wooden shoes. I learnt to run a school in a stable, to light the fire every winter morning. I learnt to be really grateful to Fortunato, the mule, and to love him. I learnt to wait with desire the gentle and noisy and dishevelled cheerfulness of Sundays, mixing the holy Mass and the tavern. I learnt to go and stay awake in the stone houses to talk with men and women. I learnt to grow in agreement with Father Carmine [the priest], young and brand-new as me. And last but not least, as it was used for “Mister Teacher”, I learnt to play cards, mainly *briscola* and *busca*, and it was really funny to see a new entry like me trying to share tricks with the old and foxy mountain men [...]

As we can easily see, Malaguzzi looked to be more interested to the environment as a framework for education, and to interpersonal relationships, rather than the elementary school curriculum in itself or the school practice as a separate world from the “real” world. We found here a real and sincere interest for the main actors of the educational enterprise, mainly children but also the social environment: the teacher, full of academic contents, remains on the backstage.

4.1.2. The rise of a school from nothing at Villa Cella

Malaguzzi had another unforgettable experience with the school of Villa Cella, a suburb of Reggio Emilia, in May 1945. The school - a kindergarten - was born outside any official channel, by means of the energy of people living there, “putting a brick on another one”, a few days after Italy was free from the Fascist regime and the Nazi Army. Here is his reconstruction of the facts:²⁰

“I run with my bicycle and I discover that’s all true. I meet women cleaning the bricks. People took the decision [...] “I am an elementary school teacher” – I say “Well” – they say – “If you tell the truth, come and teach in our school!”

This first meeting is not between the teacher and the children, but between an elementary school teacher knowing nothing about kindergarten and a woman representative of a generation coming out of the war, who starts to imagine a new future for her children, rather than for themselves.

“Men, women, children, all coming from the working class, peasants and metalworkers, special people, survived to the savagery of the war, they were acting really seriously, In eight months, the school and our friendship took root.”

People engaged in an educational enterprise starting from zero are members of the working class, people who barely had finished the first cycle of compulsory education were able to implement a school, one of the most official and formal institution of a modern State, starting from a social need transformed in educational passion. This was Loris Malaguzzi’s reflections about his training as a teacher, challenged by this unexpected event:

“I was an elementary school teacher; I was experienced, after 5 years of teaching and 3 of University: maybe the job was blocking me. My poor theoretical models were all ridiculously overturned. First, it was really traumatic that building a school could be an idea coming from ordinary people – women, hired hands, metalworkers, peasants. But the second paradox was that the school were built by that same people, without money, without technical offices, without any permission, without councils of directors, school supervisors and leaders of parties, but only working with their hands, putting a brick on another brick.”

²⁰ R. Barazzoni, *Mattone su mattone (Brick by Brick)*, Reggio Emilia, Reggio Children, 1985 (first Italian edition), 2000 (first English edition).

In Malaguzzi's mind there is a clash between the official top-down pedagogy (studied at the University of Urbino), made of theoretical teaching models, and the reality, made of people starting a schooling process without any permission, just because it was an immediate need: the participation of people, the answer to real needs, the bottom-up organization that we found positively described here will become characteristic of the whole educational Malaguzzian enterprise, and they will never default even when he was officially appointed in a strategic role of pedagogical decision-maker.

4.1.3. The role of psychology in the process of special education

As we know, in 1951, Malaguzzi went to Rome to study educational psychology: it was the first time that the importance of this discipline were stressed in order to train up-to-date teachers. Coming back to Reggio (and given up a university career), he is appointed director of an institute for special education. This are the words written in order to recall that event:

“A good psychiatrist, a good psychologist, a good social worker has to be really expert in their specific fields, but first of all they have to be endowed with another quality: a real love for children. The scientific interest for their problems has to pass in second row [...] Only a real love for children could help to overcome difficulties: we have to ensure children that they can trust us [...] Real love for children, that is to say love for humankind and for life.”

“Love for children” is usually associated to the traditional maternalistic education, where it was not important the professional qualification,²¹ rather than some kind of feelings towards children. So, it sounds weird to find the word “love” in the writings of an educator fresh of up-to-date psychological training. The contradiction is only illusory: the love for children is the emotional background needed to implement a serious educational work, in which the best and most effective tools have to be mastered by the educators and teachers. There is not effective education without a proactive feeling and a strong training.

This combination is the only mean to grant the success of the educational track, which involves both children and families. Let us understand better this point reading the experience of a student of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, written during a class test about the history of infant toddler center in Italy:

“Before this class,²² nobody at home had told anything about Malaguzzi. Having known what I was studying, my mother told me that Loris Malaguzzi played an important role in the life of her family. Her brother was a disable child, with a “mental retardation”, as it was said at that time. My grandparents (my mother's parents) went to Malaguzzi to have suggestions and to be helped in order to grow up such a child. The first thing Malaguzzi said was that it was not necessary (on the contrary, it was harmful) to keep the child separated and far from “normal” children: with his personal help and the support of the whole Medical-Psycho-pedagogical Center, my uncle was able to attend the school like all the to her children. I think that Reggio Emilia has to be really honored and proud of what this man did for us, for my family and for the all the Reggio children.”²³

²¹ In Italy, until 1998 it was possible to become kindergarten teacher at 16 years, after a 3-years training school, according to the criminal idea that the younger are the children, the shorter could be the training program.

²² The class is History and Legislation of the Educational Institutions of Early Childhood Education; it is a compulsory class for students choosing the curriculum Care Giver in the Infant Toddler Center of the Degree Program in Sciences of Education, starting from the academic year 2011-2012 in the Department of Education and Human Sciences.

²³ Words written by a student answering a question about Loris Malaguzzi as director of the MPP Center, in a test of the exam told in the above footnote, academic year 2012-2013.

It is really strange that such a successful experience and such a happy-end story was never told to the students by her family: on the contrary, one of the characteristics of the Reggio Approach will become the documentation and the dissemination of good practices, with pride but without arrogance. The second comment we can draft is that Malaguzzi's attitude here is very similar to what John Dewey told just at the beginning of the first essay of *The School and Society*, which is *The school and social progress*, where he pinpoints to the audience (mostly parents) that we have to ask the best not only for our child, but for every child: the best for the student's uncle was the best for all the children in his conditions.

4.1.4. From the "colonia" to the "House of Vacations"

The "colonia",²⁴ at the end of XIX century, was a typical philanthropic institution, paid by volunteer charity, in order to offer summer vacations in healthy places (seaside or mountains) to children coming from low-income families who could not pay for private vacations. This happened especially in the North of Italy. During the Fascism, the "colonia" system was spread all over the country, and it became one of the pillars of the consensus to the regime. The emphasis was on the hygienic effect of the vacations, just because many diseases were still endemic in the Twenties and Thirties. The "colonia" system survived to the fall of the Fascism, easily recycled because of its social purposes, once neutralized its vocation to indoctrination. So, after the Second World War, the "colonia", now run by the municipalities and not by the State, went on in proposing a model of vacation whose style was not really different from the past: great groups, paramilitary organization, no educational goals to reach, poorly trained personnel.

Malaguzzi, in the early Sixties, began to change their name: not any more a "colonia", but a "House of Vacations", a place where to find a spirit similar to the spirit of a "house". You can easily note the similarity to the name chosen by Maria Montessori for her kindergarten found in 1907 at Rome, who was called "House of Children" (and not "school", in that case). The shift from the "colonia" to the "House of Vacations" is not only a change of a name, but also the changing of the whole perspective of the event, from a narrow hygienic point of view to an educational one, as we pinpoint in the following paragraphs, dealing with children, personnel, group work, families, programs.

On the contrary of the past, the House of Vacations is open to younger children, that are the preschool children (3-5 years), and not only to school-aged children (6-13 years). For many years, at Reggio Emilia, on the 10th of May, the municipal kindergarten were transferred to the seaside! Further, used to deal with disabled children, because of his direction of the Medical-Psichopedagogical Center, Malaguzzi accepted for the first time disabled children in the House of Vacations: he managed in order to write down a "functional – dynamic profile" for each child, and obtained the collaboration with the medical services.

On the contrary of the past, where personnel were poorly trained (its task was "to control"), Malaguzzi was very careful to train a real team of professional of education and caretaking. It was in the House of vacations that Loris Malaguzzi experimented from the first time the group work of the care givers. First of all, a general director was hired for the whole year, in order to supervise the whole operations. Specific directors (most of them were women) were hired for directing the vacations of each order of school (preschool, elementary, junior high school). The educators (caregivers) were hired 4 months before the beginning of the vacations: they had to possess a high school diploma for teaching (at that time in Italy for teaching in the elementary school there was a specific high school for elementary school teachers, based on a 4-year program), they had to pass an oral examination (with Malaguzzi head of the

²⁴ Source for this part is P. Zanetti, *I servizi educativi prescolastici a Reggio Emilia: le scuole dell'infanzia e le colonie estive (Preschool Educational Services at Reggio Emilia: Kindergartens and Summer "Colonie")*, Padova, CLEUP, 2011.

commission), follow a training course, study the children profile (obtained through the questionnaires filled by families), participate to special collective meetings during the vacations. Second, he organized meeting about the organization of the House, that were real training moments for the participants. Third, training continued also during the vacations: Malaguzzi organized weekly meetings (held by the directors, and often by himself), where all the educators could express their opinions about the program, a sort of collective formative evaluation. Each evening, educators met the director in order to assess the day just past, especially focusing about the socialization of children. In this experience, Malaguzzi for the first time had the idea to give a special task to a special person, expert in fine arts, in order to organize educational events based on arts, especially painting. This special person became, in the municipal preschool, the expert of the atelier (workshop), the so called "atelierista".

On the contrary of the past, when children were gathered in huge masses where everybody could feel like a member of *The Lonely Crowd* theorized by David Riesman at the beginning of the Fifties. he started to organize them in small groups, having the same idea of "group" at the base of the educational work with care givers. The small group became the basic educational unit of the whole:

"The Group we have in mind as the basic unit of the House of vacations (autonomous, integrated and integrating) is based on a concept of education as social construction of the individual. The Group is not only an organizational instrument, or something to maintain discipline, but a necessary moment for the needs of individuals in order to self-educating and growing. Educating to grow does not happen spontaneously, but it need the presence and the participation – protective and enfranchising - of an adult."

The educational enterprise based on small grouping is not only a quantitative operation, but a qualitative one: the grouping is not a spontaneous phenomenon, but at the same time the cause and effect of a sharp pedagogical theory linked with practice.

On the contrary of the past, Malaguzzi organized a system of engagement of families. In Spring, all the families asking for the service had to fill a questionnaire, in order to give information to the educational team for the best fitting of their children's needs and the offered services. Then, at the end of Spring, Malaguzzi himself was used to write an "open letter" to all the families, explaining the characteristics of the project of that year, followed by meetings with parents. During the vacations, Malaguzzi gave the disposition to write at home at least 2 times; on Sundays, families were allowed to come to the House of vacations, staying with their children for the whole day, both in familiar moments (a short time to spend with one's own child) and in events (like parties, exhibitions, meetings) organized for all the families come to the seaside. After the vacations, Malaguzzi organized a public vision of a movie shot during the vacations, in the "Sala del Tricolore" ("Tricolor Flag Room" – the room of the official meetings of the Municipal Council), repeated 3 times at different hours of the late afternoon and of the evening, in order to allow all the working parents to watch the movie.

On the contrary of the past, where here was not any project, and all the activities were thought for great groups (sunbathing, swimming, free games), Malaguzzi and his team thought activities for small groups (similar to the interest centers theorized by Ovide Decroly at the beginning of the Twenties); paintings, going to the village to see the harbor, singing and so on. These small group were heterogeneous for age and sex. At the beginning of the day, there were general meeting (plenaries) of the groups of age, in order to decide the day program (or to recall the program decided the day before, in order to go on with the activities). Each vacation was projected around a theme (the village of the Robinsons, the Vietnam war, kites ...)

In conclusion, the House of vacations of Cesenatico can be considered an educational laboratory in which the embryo of a new educational approach was implanted. Then this embryo became an living organism in the municipal kindergarten from 1962 and in the infant-toddler centers from 1971. At this point, I suggest a brief comparison of Malaguzzi's educational work to some philosophical and pedagogical insights by John Dewey.

4. 2. John Dewey's and Loris Malaguzzi's perspectives in education: a curious convergence

Some of the main features of Malaguzzi's perspective in education, never landed to a systematic summary, could be curiously found in the educational philosophy of John Dewey. There is not the evidence that Malaguzzi had read Dewey's texts, even it is possible: by the way, Malaguzzi was a young teacher when Dewey's works were translated in Italian, becoming best sellers in very few years, at the end of the Forties.

4.2.1. A common idea of relationship between educational processes and social change

So we found some insights about the relationship between education and society, the idea of active education, the non exclusive role of the school in the whole educational process and the idea of the educational process as a continuous research of new descriptions of the reality. Many people remember the main thesis of *School and the Social Progress*, the first essay of *The School and Society* (1899).²⁵

“Whenever we have in mind the discussion of a new movement in education, it is especially necessary to take the broader, or social, view. Otherwise, changes in the school institution and tradition will be looked at as the arbitrary inventions of particular teachers; at the worst transitory fads, and at the best merely improvements in certain details — and this is the plane upon which it is too customary to consider school changes. It is as rational to conceive of the locomotive or the telegraph as personal devices. The modification going on in the method and curriculum of education is as much a product of the changed social situation, and as much an effort to meet the needs of the new society that is forming, as are changes in modes of industry and commerce.”

According to this perspective, the social change forces the educational change, even if the “almighty educator” thinks to be the only wheel able to start the movement of any educational process. According to Dewey, the educational change needs a sharp knowledge of the social trends, in order to suggest effective innovations. This process was clearly followed by Malaguzzi when he implemented the “House of vacations” in place of the traditional “colonia”, in Italy, in the Sixties: the change of the name and especially of the educational contents was forced by the new spirit of the Italian society and of the new request of a democratic participation in education, that Malaguzzi and his team were really able to anticipate.

Another curious convergence between the great American philosopher and the man from Reggio Emilia is the idea of the strict interdependence of the familiar and social environment in their relationships with the formal education. This is one of the most famous justification of the “laboratory” at school, where to be “occupied” in educational activities rather than to sit down in silence listening a verbal instruction:

“Back of the factory system lies the household and neighborhood system. Those of us who are here today need go back only one, two, or at most three generations, to find a time when the household was practically the center in which were carried on, or about which were clustered, all the typical forms of industrial occupation. [...] The entire industrial process stood revealed, from the production on the farm of the raw materials till the finished article was actually put to use. Not only this, but practically every member of the household had his own share in the work. The children, as they gained in strength and

²⁵ Source for this part is J. Dewey, *The School and Society* (1899, 1915), edited by Jo Ann Boydston with a preface by Joe R. Burnett, Carbondale (IL), Southern Illinois University Press, 1976.

capacity, were gradually initiated into the mysteries of the several processes. It was a matter of immediate and personal concern, even to the point of actual participation.”

This is not a nostalgic operation of recalling the “beautiful past times”, but the analytic description of the educational value of a past social system, where it was possible to learn through the real life. The suggested educational change (laboratory at school) is aimed to rescue those educational outcomes in a renewed social environment: this is perfectly in line with the opening of the municipal institutions, operated by Malaguzzi and his team, to the contributions of the family and of the social environment as a whole, because these subjects, completely redundant in the traditional schools, are one of the pillar of a new “learning by doing”, even in kindergarten.

And Dewey goes further, in *The School and Social Progress*, in his argumentation:

“We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and of character-building involved in this kind of life: training in habits of order and of industry, and in the idea of responsibility, of obligation to do something, in the world. [...] Personalities which became effective in action were bred and tested in the medium of action. Again, we cannot overlook the importance for educational purposes of the close and intimate acquaintance got with nature at first hand, with real things and materials, with the actual processes of their manipulation, and the knowledge of their social necessities and uses. In all this there was continual training of observation, of ingenuity, constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities. The educative forces of the domestic spinning and weaving, of the sawmill, the gristmill, the cooper shop, and the blacksmith forge, were continuously operative.”

According to Dewey’s and Malaguzzi’s visions of educational change, the questions are: what kind of abilities are learnt by children at home now, in the United States of the second industrial revolution for Dewey and in the global world for Malaguzzi? They are very poor. And what kind of abilities are given at school? In traditional school, at any time, usually the memorization of notions is stressed. And what is the relationship between these 2 environments? Often these 2 worlds are thought as different, irreducible one to another. Dewey’s and Malaguzzi’s answers are different from the ones given by the traditional schools they had to face: first of all, the familiar and the social environment are full of resources (if they are not, school has the task to re-discover them); second, notions come from the practice, and they are meaningful learnt rather than mechanically accumulated; third, schools and society works as communicating vessels, where the exchange of information, based on the principle of reciprocity, will lead to a homeostatic balance. As we have seen, Malaguzzi was very careful to transform in educational issues some of the “normal” behaviors performed at home and/or in the society, such as watching television: what does it mean for a child to look at the television? What kind of programs do children see? What do children learn watching TV at home, with or without the help of an adult? And what could children learn watching TV at school, even in a kindergarten, even in an infant toddler center? What is the added value of watching television in a school? Malaguzzi has not pre-cooked answers, deductively proceeding by an abstract philosophy of education, but he shows the way to search for situated answers: ask the children, listen to their answers, build up something with them.

4.2.2. A common idea of research as the core of educational processes

This way of proceeding is very similar to the idea of research pinpointed by John Dewey in his most famous work about epistemology, *Logic, A Theory of Inquiry* (1938), a text which is, quite 40 years after *The School and Society*, a sort of the *summa logica* of his philosophical thinking. We have to note that “logic” is

linked to “inquiry”: nothing is treated as a given object (in Latin, *datum*), but as a result of a process of inquiring.²⁶

Dewey gives the following definition of inquiry, in the Chapter 4:

“Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent directions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situations into a unified whole”

The sequence indeterminate situation - institution of a problem - determination of a problem – solution of the problem is very similar to the implicit process of reasoning which is at the base of Malaguzzi’s educational work. The operational character of facts and meanings , and the specular nature of common sense and scientific inquiry pushes Dewey to describe the birth of ideas with this words:

“Every idea originates as a suggestion, but not every suggestion is an idea. The suggestion becomes an idea when it is examined with reference to its functional fitness; its capacity as a means of resolving the given situation.”

The described process fits perfectly with the most part of the pedagogical projects set up in the kindergarten and infant toddler centers in the Reggio municipal system: let us analyze, according with this model, the last educational experience of Malaguzzi, the pedagogical supervision of the project “The amusement park for birds” (1992). The indeterminate situation is described by children, when they compare their existential situation (each year in Spring an amusement park comes to Reggio Emilia) and the situation of birds: what kind of amusements they have? Is it a park? Is yes, where it is? Rapidly discovered that birds have not any amusement park, and thinking that this lack is not tolerable, for children engaged in the wellness of birds, the problem is: we want to build up an amusement park for birds, but how? Identifying a solution for the problem through a process of reasoning, children come to the solution: they need the help of someone skilled in wooden constructions. A further deepening of the solutions leads them to identify in their grandfathers the only people they can ask a hand in order to realize their project (fathers are at work during the school time, while grandparents are free, because they are retired). The first prototype of the park is set up in the garden, but the solution is open, because the park could be renewed year by year.

4.3. The Reggio Emilia approach today: the educational environment

After this diachronic approach to the history of the innovative ways gone across by Loris Malaguzzi and his team, in order to plan and to implement early childhood educational institutions, we can evaluate in a better historical and theoretical framework some characteristics of the Reggio Emilia Approach, available in any contemporary institutions who really wants to face the challenge of the global society. We will pinpoint 3 main features of the Reggio Approach’s educational environment, all of them coming from a long history, as we think to have demonstrated: the documentation, the atelier and the internal/external spaces (the section and the garden).²⁷

²⁶ Source for this part is J. Dewey, *Logic, a Theory of Inquiry*, New York, Henry Holt & C. Inc, 1938.

²⁷ Sources for this part are C. Rinaldi, *Il diario al nido per fermare la storia dei bambini: storia di Laura (The diary at the infant toddler center in order to fix children’s stories; the history of Laura)*, Reggio Emilia, Comune di Reggio Emilia, 1983; C. Rinaldi – P. Cagliari, *Educazione e creatività (Education and creativity)*, Reggio Emilia, Comune di Reggio Emilia, 1996; C. Rinaldi, *L’ascolto visibile*, Reggio Emilia, Comune di Reggio Emilia, 1999; *Le domande dell’educare oggi (The questions for educating today)*, Reggio Emilia, Comune di Reggio Emilia, 1999; *I pensieri che sostengono l’azione*

4.3.1. Documentation

Documentation, in ordinary language, is the collection of “documents”, permitting to prove the truth of a fact or to confirm a thesis. In educational language, and certainly according with the Reggio Emilia Approach, documentation is a fundamental part of the procedures in order to improve learning and to meaningfully modify the relationships between learning and teaching.

To reach these goals, documentation has to be conceived, first of all, as a synthetic and creative meeting between words and images, able to show the processes of constructions of relationship and knowledge among children, between children and adults, between children and the environment in which they live (at school and outside school). Documentation gives the possibility to track how children learn, becoming itself a part of the learning process. These are the Reggio Approach’s ideas in order to use pictures for documentate the educational processes:

“[...] Images represent little and extra-ordinary events of everyday life, showing how school could be a place where early childhood learning processes are supported and documented [...] The language of photography is now present in the documentation processes in the infant-toddler centers and in the preschools. The choice to communicate and making visible the experiences lived by children and with children, supported by the diffusion of instruments and technologies easy to use by anybody, pushes an increasing number of teachers to deal with photography. Anyhow, there is a great quantity of materials produced in the educational contexts, but not always there is the same carefulness to the quality of images and of documentation. The term “quality”, in this case, is not referred to the strictly technical ability to shot pictures, but mainly to their expressive strength and their possibility to communicate something valuable [...]”

As a narrative form, documentation is attractive and meaningful only if it is a little bit problematic and self-reflexive. The variety of languages (verbal and not-verbal) should proceed with the ability of inoculating some doubts and of arising some questions, rather than giving only one choice, like in a multiple-choice test.

The collection of a correct and complete documentation, mainly visual (pictures, drawings) or material (artifacts) permitted, in the early Eighties, the implementation of the famous exhibition “The Hundred Languages of Children”, the event who started to spread the Reggio Emilia Approach all over the world.

4.3.2. The atelier (workshop)

Each unity of the Reggio Emilia early childhood educational system has an internal atelier, a particular space furnished as a workshop (with real tools and real materials, natural or recycled) animated by a particular specialist (the “atelierista”), where the possibility of using the famous “100 expressive languages of children” stop to be just a pedagogical slogan and can become a reality in everyday school time. In Malaguzzi’s fascinating prose, this is the atelier:

“The Atelier [...] produced a revolutionary break in, because it is at the same time a complication and further instrument, able to offer a richness of combinatory and creative possibilities among the

educativa: una pedagogia che da forma alle cose e non inibisce la forma delle cose (The thoughts sustaining the educational action: a pedagogy shaping things and not hiding the shape of things), Reggio Emilia, Comune di Reggio Emilia, 1994 (1), 2002 (2); *In dialogo con Reggio Emilia: ascoltare, ricercare e apprendere: discorsi e interventi 1984-2007 (In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: to listen, to research and to learn: discourses and speeches 1984-2007)*, Reggio Emilia, Reggio Children, 2009. These texts are not translated English.

languages and the non-verbal intelligences of children. This is a defense against verbosity [...] but also against the pseudo-culture of the “head-as-a-container” [...] it is the model living at the same time the major impression of cultural development and the major depression from the point of view of the effective increasing of knowledge.”

As we know, the atelier was born in the early Sixties, in the “House of Vacations”, in order to create new relationships, wider and diversified, among the different people in that peculiar educational environment. Malaguzzi did not want to implement artistic education as a new discipline, in the traditional way, but to use the language of fine arts in osmosis with other languages.

So, transferred to the kindergarten and infant toddler centers, now the atelier is not a place of standard production, but of creation, not a place for “testing” some abilities in a quantitative way, but of facilitation of the emersion of the real creative processes of children development.

4.3.3. Internal and external spaces: the section room and the garden

According to Carla Rinaldi, the actual President of the Loris Malaguzzi Foundation,²⁸ these are the characteristic of a positive school environment and climate:

“School has a right to have its own environment, its own architecture, its peculiar conceptualization and finalization of spaces; there is no doubts about it. But this right of the school (that means of teachers, of children and of families) will not be recognized in our country if the pedagogical culture will not understand that education is a facto f complex interactions, many of them happening only if the environment participate to the interaction, too. [...] Someone wrote that the environment has to be a sort of fish tank, where ideas, morality, attitudes, cultures of the people living there are mirrored. Here at Reggio Emilia we have tried to go in this direction.”

The space organization of the basic unit of children in an infant toddler center and/or kindergarten, is a room called “section” (in Italian *sezione*), a general term used in a technical and pedagogical meaning for the physical space and for the group of children hosted in it. This is very important, just because children will live there for 3 years, 8 hours per day: the *sezione* will be their house and their home.

The garden, in the contrary of the section, is a collective space for all the children and parents attending the school: on the contrary of the idea of garden in the traditional schools, where the so called “gardens” are usually empty deserts, in the Reggio Approach it is not only an open space where to send children to play when they are annoyed of the ordinary activities in the closed spaces, but a real open-space atelier, a place where to learn something that you could not learn anywhere else.

Conclusion: defending the idea of a “public” education

The fruits of a dialogue between these two perspectives could be meaningful and useful not only in order to run infant-toddler centers and preschools (and “schools”, too) as best as possible, but also in order to develop a new philosophy of education able to front both some neoliberalistic perspectives, pushing

²⁸ After the creation of Reggio Children (1994), the special company for promoting the Reggio Approach all over the world, a special place for hosting either educational events connected with Reggio Children was implemented, the Loris Malaguzzi International Center (inaugurated in 2006 and completed in 2012). In 2011, the Reggio Children – Loris Malaguzzi Center Foundation was created by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, involving both special international partners (NAREA from North America, Red Solare from South America, Reggio Emilia Institutet from Stockholm) and many citizens by a strong crowdfunding campaign.

towards a commercial and “moneytarian” idea of education, and the revival of a negationistic idea of education for all, coming for example from the religious fundamentalism widespread in the world.

Twenty-one years after his death, Loris Malaguzzi, who in his life shared many of John Dewey’s attitudes towards education, is still critically supervising our way to educate children through his pedagogical heritage.

Conclusion: Maria Montessori and Loris Malaguzzi, two lives devoted to early childhood education

According to my personal point of view, knowing something about the real life of the educators is a propedeutical track in order to understand better their philosophical ideas, their pedagogical choices, their theoretical heritage.

I want now to pinpoint three pedagogical insights in common between Montessori and Malaguzzi, despite their many differences: the idea of a social child, the idea of the active role of the child in the learning process, the idea of education as an open, collective and cooperative enterprise.

Both Montessori and Malaguzzi are in agreement about the idea that children attending schools are already shaped by many familiar and social events, many of them contributing to “deviate” the real children’s attitudes and feelings. The presumed spontaneity of the children is a pedagogical myth, because children are sons and daughters of their environment: the educational work performed in the infant toddler centers and kindergartens overlaps a life shaped by language practices, social and individual fruition of mass media, experiences leaving a thick sediment in the children’s bodies and minds. The educational work cannot ignore this pre-educational life.

Both Montessori and Malaguzzi are in agreement about the idea that children have to have an active role in the learning process, even if they disagree about the contents of activities. Malaguzzi denied the value of the Montessorian didactic materials which seem to be a little bit too much abstract and far from the real experiences of children, such as the Froebelian gifts were. But even if materials are gleaned by the real life of the children (as theorized by the Agazzi sisters at the end of the XIX century), the use of the materials has to bring to curious children, able to reason about their experiences and to transform them in occasion of learning. Common to both approaches is the emphasis about the social activities performed in the school (cleaning the common spaces, for example), because only in these complex situations children could demonstrate what they have eventually learnt individually.

Finally, Both Montessori and Malaguzzi have the idea of education as a complex enterprise which is at the same time open (and not closed in the walls of a school), collective (because it is the effect of many educational actors: children, teachers, educationists, *atelieristi*, parents and grandparents, decision makers, citizens) and cooperative (because subjects engaged, such as dowels in a complex Byzantine mosaic or pieces of a huge Ravensburger puzzle).

All these three insights recall us that a good dose of serendipity is incorporated in any educational process, and the dawn of a new holistic perspective in early childhood education corresponds to the sunset of traditional almighty points of view focused on the pedagogical control of children’s life.

