

Dewey, Democracy, and Malaguzzi's vision for the Schools of Reggio Emilia

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ABSTRACT: Malaguzzi often refers to Dewey as one of the 'founding fathers', one of the threads weaving the warp, one of the cornerstones of a much larger building. In defining the value of these connections Malaguzzi explicitly refers to activism, creativity and mediation between individuality and society. Central in his vision is the need to connect individual and social dimension, build a culture and society able to embrace both, to work for the common good while respecting individuality. The quest for a 'new individualism' is strong in Dewey as well, together with the need for qualified participation. While the questions are mostly similar, this article aims at establishing whether the answers are too and whether a direct link can be traced between these two thinkers. Dewey lived a long and productive life, he died at 92, and left an incommensurable contribution to pedagogy. His work had a wide audience in post-WW2 Italy and became an essential reference for pedagogists. His philosophy left lasting traces throughout the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA). This article aims at investigating whether Dewey's vision of democracy and the role of schools in fostering it, inspired Malaguzzi and the schools in Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi's idea of democracy is a complex, multidimensional vision, that imbues all his work and writings since the post-war years. Contrary to Dewey, Malaguzzi does not dwell on philosophical argumentation, he often talks about it, but almost never in connection with the official governmental form and never defines it. Our investigation is therefore not easy. It implies deconstructing the concept of democracy to find clues and indicators leading back to Dewey's vision. We will base our analysis on Dewey's texts available to Malaguzzi and compare them with his own writings, focusing on two main aspects: participation and the relation between individual and society.

KEYWORDS: Participation, Individualism, Community, Reggio Emilia Approach, Freedom of Intelligence

The background

Dewey and Malaguzzi: a philosopher and a visionary practitioner, one the product of American society, the other an Italian communist, born 61 years apart. The consensus is that Dewey's socio-constructivist, hands-on approach and the role of arts, presented through the writings of influential intellectuals in post-WWII Italy, influenced the REA (Dodd-

Nufrio, 2011; Lindsay, 2016). Yet, looking closely, another truth emerges. Dewey and Malaguzzi consider education and schools as the key to unleash humankind true potential, democratic education as the only way to achieve a truly just society. They also share the inability to accept compromises and second-best solution when it came to core principles, to quality education and participation. On this common sensitivity a dialogic exchange across time and space could take place.

First step will be to consider Dewey's writings and theories could have been known to Malaguzzi. Then we will focus on content analysis and look for direct links.

The widespread diffusion of Dewey's corpus started from 1946 thanks to Ernesto Codignola, the publishing company La Nuova Italia and a group of Florence-based pedagogists. In 1945 Ernesto Codignola opened in Florence the *Scuola-città* Pestalozzi, inspired by Dewey's pedagogical idea. Malaguzzi knew Codignola personally, at least since 1948, through their common work for the Italian Commission of FICE. (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016)

Intellectuals in post-war Italy were looking for inspiration to build a new and democratic society after 25 years of Fascist regime. Florence became a forge for a new society and a new school with Dewey's philosophy at its core. This intellectual effort had two major avenues, on one hand translation of Dewey's corpus, starting from his political works, and on the other hand the construction of new approaches for society, pedagogy and didactics based on development of Dewey's original work. The first work printed were political essays: 1946 *Liberalism and social action*; 1949 *Individualism Old and New*, then came the pedagogical works: 1949 *School and Society* and *Democracy and Education*; 1950 *Education Today* (translated by Lamberto Borghi) and *Experience and Education*. After 1951 the translation of philosophical works takes place. New translations and publishing will go on until 1974 (Cambi, 2016).

Codignola and his group opened a critical dialogue with Dewey, that lasted well into the '70s with the writings by Lamberto Borghi, who had met Dewey directly in the US during the war. The effort was grounding a new Italian society and school on Dewey's rational rigor, that had humankind promotion holding both individual and society at large on equal stand. Dewey was a key reference in so far as he recognized the central role of school «quale agenzia di formazione culturale e di pensiero critico per tutti e luogo generativo di un vivere sociale autenticamente democratico» (Cambi 2016, p. 91).

While Florence, with Codignola and Borghi, was the most important center of research on Dewey, the debate spread across Italy (Cambi, 2016). Malaguzzi was aware of it and both translations of Dewey's work and Borghi's *Educazione e autorità nell'Italia moderna* (1951) had wide diffusion across Italy and in Reggio Emilia.

1. Democracy and participation

According to Dewey: a democratic form of government is not a goal per se. «Universal suffrage, recurring elections, responsibility of those who are in political power to the voters, and the other factors of democratic government [...] are not a final end and a final value. They are to be judged on the basis of their contribution to end.» (Dewey, 2010, p. 86). This 'end' is democracy, i.e.

primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, [...] is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory. (Dewey, 2001, 91)

A relational view of democracy, with communication, interconnections, and mutual influence at its core and each person individually contributing to this collective meaning making. Education is the enabling factor «for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together» (Dewey, 2010, p. 86). Exclusion from participation is a global loss because it implies that certain individuals will not contribute to this shared idea of society. (Simpson & Stack, 2010)

The idea of participation and cooperation, of plurality and ensemble, is often part of Malaguzzi's work. This participation has 3 pillars: Children, Families and Staff. In 1993 *Una carta per tre diritti* Malaguzzi defines it as a «pedagogy of participation and research» in opposition to a «pedagogy of self-sufficiency and prescription» (Malaguzzi 1993).

Participation and democracy [...] are specific forms of a life of relations, of personal and collective organization, that can be upheld with legislation, and that as part of the unfolding of history and culture derive from continuous and open processes. [...] Participation grows and safeguards democracy and liberty, liberty and democracy grow and safeguard participation. A need for change and faith in the possibility of change as the promotion of a higher and more just degree of individual and collective wellbeing are the elements that justify participation and make it move forward. (Malaguzzi, 2016, p. 355)

The connections with Dewey are striking: democracy and participation as a way to organize relations among mankind; institutional aspects as means not ends; democracy and participation as intertwined phenomena, one cannot exist without the other; participation as the way to ensure change, justice, and society development, with real contribution of each and every man and woman.

Dewey sees the role of education as enabler of individual participation into a global social discourse. Education must become a social endeavor carried out in institutions open to society and social changes. There is a silver lining connecting individuals, groups, social life, and community (Simpson & Stack 2010). A connection unavoidable since «organization, as in any living organism, is the cooperative consensus of multitudes of cells, each living in exchange with others.» (Dewey, 1999, 52).

It is often taken as a given that Malaguzzi's ecological vision develops fully in the '80s and '90s with other theoretical references (Bateson, Bronfenbrenner) and gives a prominent role to relations between all-beings and their environment. Yet many of the relational choices for the schools were made much earlier.

But if we reflect on our experience [...] we can say all the connections we were aware of, all the connections we were capable of, have been realized in some way as part of our organization. [...] the pair-teacher and our attempts to connect up things that traditionally were not connected; [...] connections between environments that contain a connected vision of systemic space [...] our attempts to go out often [from school] [...] the issue of social management [...] the very idea of the child we have tried to bring forward is a highly inter-related idea (Malaguzzi, 2016, 330)

These choices date back to the 1960s and 1970s, finding their official recognition in 1972 *Regolamento delle scuole comunali dell'infanzia* (Rulebook for municipal schools) approved by the municipality. The Pedagogy of Relations that so clearly identifies the REA, is already defined in the '70s: «...they (children) feel a stimulating solidarity alive around them [...] the wider fabric of this new pedagogy of relations, which sparks off communication and relations between the world of adults and children, between school and outside» (Malaguzzi 1971, *ibid*, p. 180). There is much of Dewey in this vision of a school as a living organism, that finds its deep meaning in communication and relations, «a community open to cultural exchange with families, and with the world of nature and man» (Malaguzzi, 1968, 131).

2. Participatory practices

For meaningful participation to unfold, tools are needed. For Dewey, participation is the way to obtain «liberty and justice for all»¹ by giving voice and dignity to everyone. Equality in opportunities to contribute becomes paramount. «if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is

¹ USA – Pledge of Alliance - «I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and to the Republic for which it stands one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all» (1923 version)

that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all» (Dewey, 2001, p. 127). Individuals need to develop at the fullest of their potential, not only for their wellbeing, but also as a benefit to society at large.

Malaguzzi shares the connections between pedagogy and society improvement, since pedagogy of relations «resides in more than merely meeting but in genuine integration of parents, teachers, children, citizens and neighbourhoods, in a renewed and richer vision of society» (Malaguzzi, 1970, in Cagliari *et al.* (eds) 2016, p. 172).

In Dewey's utopian schools, all adults in society share teaching responsibilities (Dewey, 2010). Just as in Reggio Emilia new relations with parents need:

a school that is consciously open to all hypotheses for freeing and renewing methods and aims; and an organized social context that is equally open not only to recognizing but also to stimulating new concepts of citizens' powers, presence and contributions, and ways and times for discussing and resolving common affairs democratically.' (Malaguzzi, 1969, in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, p. 144)

Parents are involved in Reggio Emilia pre-school system since its beginning. Malaguzzi believes that this involvement must be constructed through debate and qualified participation. He starts training/informative sessions since the '50s. In his experience, only with time spent together sharing a dialogue, contributions by participants become concrete, connected, meaningful and to the point. Not only are meetings organized to involve parents in pedagogical issues, but participation is monitored and urged (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016).

The parallel is with Dewey's concept of 'freedom of intelligence' as a base to grant personal happiness while contributing to society. The contrast is with 'freedom of action', a mystified idea of individualism that causes chaos and not full citizenship. The role of education in achieving and protecting democracy is creating independence of mind, ability to inquire, i.e., 'freedom of intelligence'. (Dewey, in Simpson, Stack, 2010).

As parents approach the educational services, their first concern is to their child. It is the school responsibility to integrate this dialogue into a wider environment and network. «Children's behavior is discussed and analyzed [...] not merely described but investigated by joining elements of biology and psychology with social elements and viewing each child as a living part of a system of relations, not a neutral entity» (Malaguzzi 1971, in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, p. 181-182). Only families that are aware of schools educational choices can truly collaborate. This sharing has to be done on practical, concrete issues, such as school projects to foster collective knowledge and exchange. «An itinerary capable of orienting the walking together and growing together that are essential elements in an education that is equally reassuring and liberating» (Malaguzzi

1969, in Cagliari, *et al.*, 2016, p. 134). School as a community experience, that shares everything with families, not only positive aspects, but also problems, questions, difficulties, in order to trigger real dialogue and exchange and give to everyone the possibility of growing together.

Key tool for this task is documenting processes «using entrance halls, walls, larger spaces and areas with freedom of movement as privileged places for encounters [...] as surfaces for permanent exhibitions» (ivi, 229). Since the beginning Malaguzzi requires that teachers, in pair, prepare working plans and working notebooks as a «moment of great importance, of reflection, and of cultural and professional enrichment» a community effort «in which everyone participates: teachers, auxiliaries, parents, members of *Comitati di scuola e città*, members of the *Equipe Pedagogico-didattica*» (Malaguzzi, 1973, 192). These, together with children's productions and teachers' notes of children in action are traces that support teachers' reflection and designing (*progettazione*). Collegiality, reflexion, shared responsibility: «by making it participatory in this way, we give the work of education the meaning of a genuine practice of solidarity, of inter-subjective proposals and research, of effectively checking our own personal action, and of a project turned to social ends» (Malaguzzi 1984, 354).

School staff as a whole, without distinction among teachers and auxiliary is in a path of constant reflection and growth, through analysis, trainings, professional development (officially scheduled and mandatory for all) and meetings. The idea is empowerment, abandoning «attitudes of supposed inferiority, the feeling of being incapable or daunted» (Malaguzzi 1972, 188), because everyone has to contribute to granting quality educational experiences for children.

Comitati di Scuola e Città², established in the Seventies are a tool to facilitate community participation to the schools. Open to every citizen, they are a forum for dialogue and frank discussion, to compare points of view, take common decision and make schools more credible. People participates because they feel their contribution matters.

Decreti Delegati (DD)³ define parental involvement in state school with a different approach, limiting participation to parents and teachers as such. Parents, within the school context, are presented as fragmentated individuals, because they must leave behind their other identities as workers and parts of society. This is unacceptable to Malaguzzi and his ecological vision. Parents can elect representative, consult the school only regarding their child, be informed of school choices. There is no mandatory request to create a common educational

² They are now called *Consigli Infanzia-Città* and their role is more of citizenry involvement into educational issues, than of social management of a single school. Elections take place every 3 years

³ A set of 6 Laws passed by the Italian parliament from July 1973 through May 1974, that regulated national school system from pre-school to high school, excluding university

experience embracing children, families, and staff, and no common discussion or reflection on how to build new and democratic school. DD loudly proclaim freedom of teachers and families from societal constraints, but that to Malaguzzi is not real freedom. For him it means loneliness and inability to be effective, the effectiveness that can only be achieved through collective thinking and actions. (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016) Hard not to see the parallel with Dewey's focus on 'freedom of intelligence' vs. 'freedom of action'.

Pillar of Dewey's democratic school is teachers' direct involvement in decision making. Teachers should have a more direct saying in curriculum, methodology, pedagogical approaches. Only in a school where democratic principles are implemented through shared responsibilities between teachers, administrations, managers, and parents, can democratic ideas and mind frames be really passed on to future generation. Experiencing these principles first-hand is the only way to really 'learn' them. The idea that this should not be possible, due to teachers' incompetence, it is unacceptable to Dewey. As for citizens, only by participating and reflecting, can teachers become more aware and effective. «The system which makes no great demands upon originality, upon invention, upon the continuous expression of individuality, works automatically to put and to keep the more incompetent teachers in the school» (Dewey, in Simpson, Stack, 2010, 101).

In Malaguzzi's vision all the individuals who revolve around the school are competent: Children, Parents, Auxiliaries. Yet, just as for Dewey, a special competence is requested to teachers. As orchestrators of common participation, teachers in Reggio Emilia must acquire a new mindset.

Teachers must possess a habit of questioning their certainties, a growth of sensitivity, awareness, and availability, the assuming of a critical style of research and continually updated knowledge of children, an enriched evaluation of parental roles, and skills to talk, listen, and learn from parents. Responding to all of these demands requires from teachers a constant questioning of their teaching (Edwards *et al.*, 1998, 69)

3. Individualism old and new, subjectivity and the role of community

Democracy and participation imply a balance between the right and desire of individual and the need of society. This balance differs across time and space: every culture struggles to find its own. Is it possible that two men, so different in time, culture, work path, could share a similar vision of this balance?

Malaguzzi is a communist and a distinct believer in community and society, in doing things together, in focusing on the group rather than

on the individual child. And yet he looks for a middle ground between two theoretical framework that do not convince him. On one hand the soviet school does not respect individuality enough; on the other hand, the western «myth of individuality», overlooks the social component of learning and does not imply «respecting the individual.» (Malaguzzi in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, 267).

Dewey was also critical of the official American value system, especially individualism. Individualism in pre-industrial America was coherent with a community working together to build a new country. The open-frontier, and the equal opportunity it granted, ensured fairness. Working for one self-improvement meant contributing to society as a whole. In corporate America this individualism becomes a fight for the survival of the fittest. In big business America freedom and equality are not granted because individual opportunities and starting points are too different. Old values are distorted to suit the new reality and become barriers to the development of new ones. «there is a perversion of the whole ideal of individualism to conform to the practices of a pecuniary culture. It has become the source and justification of inequalities and oppressions» (Dewey 1999, 17).

The way out is supporting individual potentiality for development, that evolves and takes shapes in relation with the conditions and the challenges faced. These connections will trigger new imaginative way to contribute to society and produce free culture for all. (ivi, 94)

Dewey considers the term 'culture' as bearing two meanings: the personal intellectual life of each individual and «the type of emotion and thought that is characteristic of a people and epoch as a whole, an organic intellectual and moral quality» (ivi, 70). Without investment in the first, the second becomes poorer. Modernity tends to separate «...society into a learned and an unlearned class, a leisure and a laboring class» this separation is matched by the one «between culture and utility in present education» (Dewey 2001, 263). Education as personal intellectual growth only for the few, and as technical training for the working class. Dewey strongly disagrees. The ability to think, desire, imagine, and reflect, should be the key object of education for everyone, in order to achieve 'freedom of intelligence' and grant comprehensive participation (ibid.).

Education needs to change deeply, and rethink not only its practice, but also its theories. The path to find this new individualism implies involving every member of society in planning and organization, encouraging reflexive processes, moving away from a society made of few intellectual who plane and mass of people who execute.

Given this framework, Dewey is against presenting children and teachers with pre-made material, because it does not stimulate personal approach and reflection. Yet, he is also against laissez-faire in education because individuality is not a matter of feelings and impulses. True individuality, the ability to take control of one's own life, reacting autonomously to external events, can be achieved by children only

through learning by doing, facing real life problems and working together with peers, teachers and other adults to find solutions (Dewey in Simpson, Stack 2010).

This been said, Dewey calls for a new individualism, but individualism nonetheless. Yet is this so far from Malaguzzi's vision? For him, a classroom is made of children, not as an undetermined group, but one by one, an association of children, each of them with his/her own abilities, desires ideas. (Malaguzzi, in Edwards *et al.*, 1995) He appears critical of the soviet approach to education.

Even though Vygotsky, Luria and Leont'ev [...] have recovered the value of the environment in forming individuals, and the value of educators and education, they then conclude by saying that children's education is necessarily inter-psychic, and that it only becomes intra-psychic later. [...] I am always highly suspicious when a theory spells out two different situations in the individual. We cannot cut an individual into pieces (Malaguzzi, in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, 267).

This fracture should be recomposed, both for Dewey as for Malaguzzi

saying that intra-psychic education only comes later, so that children only become the agents of their own achievements and experiences at a later point, [...] is highly suspicious to me. [...] This is to injure the capacity of the individual for autonomous and creative self-organization (ibid.).

This is true in Dewey as well. He opposes individualism detached from the social contest: respecting the individual is granting everyone equal opportunities for growth and not letting individual conditions determine your destiny. The changes in 20th century society impose a change in creeds and values, «to validate and embody the distinctive moral element in the American version of individualism: Equality and freedom expressed not merely externally and politically but through personal participation in the development of a shared culture» (Dewey 1999, p. 25). Malaguzzi's vision refuses the ideological dichotomy and is coherent with Dewey, because it respects the individual within a society. An individual who is liberated through his/her effective participation in collective wellbeing.

I believe an acceptable cultural matrix can only be found in a dialectical relation between inter-psychic and intra-psychic education and not in trying to conciliate the two. In an education where we are capable of self-producing, self-organising and self-making as participants in our own destiny and in our own education, in a context that is permanently dialectical; and [in an education that] avoids all risk of mythically exalting the individual on the one hand and an exaggerated collectivism on the other (Malaguzzi in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, 267).

Each child has its own personality and a right to a personal space, in constant relation with the others and the environment. It is a culture of subjectivity and not individuality, a culture of democracy and, of free choices, but in constant dialogue with others. This balance between individual and society can be achieved by helping children developing an individual personality by interiorizing «different points of view, different points of life, different life choices, transpositions of life, transgressions» (Malaguzzi in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, p. 399). Children are protagonists of their education, but within a community that supports their growth. Educators should not try to predetermine and establish children's emergent characteristics and use those as a guide in the learning process. Children change over time and are a never-ending discovery. Freezing our impression of them regarding educational achievements could determine a self-fulfilling prophecy. Imposing on them social role models and gender roles without critical thinking, undermines their ability to define themselves fully.

...an educational project that makes children and young people the holders of incommunicable knowledge and disciplines, represses their spirit of criticism and research, shapes them for passive conformism, authority, discipline, sexual repression, competitiveness, and diffidence towards active responsible social relations; it is a project that is incapable of leaving traces of a culture connected with tradition and memory, or of using research and experimentation as tools for knowledge and discovery, for the promotion of education, culture and society.' (Malaguzzi in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, 216)

Just as Dewey, Malaguzzi does not want to forget who we are, the core of our culture and our tradition, but to find it we need to move away from dogmas and preconceive ideas and look at reality with an attitude of research and experimentation, i.e., Dewey's application of scientific methods to social sciences. What does this imply for schools? Schools should construct and reconstruct through vital dialogue and exchange, with people inside and outside schools and children, trying to be critical and not self-referential. To grant this, school contents must evolve along with society, opening to new needs and suggestions, ready to sustain scrutiny by a large movement, «constantly updated and strengthened through interpreting the needs of children, families and society (inseparably woven together), and creating [...] shared responsibility [...] examining and guaranteeing them in a constant democratic regeneration» (Malaguzzi 1975 in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, 233).

Conclusions

This article investigates Dewey's legacy on the REA, focusing on participation and the relationship between individual and society, two aspects that are often overlooked.

Malaguzzi knew Dewey since the 50s both directly through widely available translations of Dewey's work and indirectly, thanks to contacts with Codignola and his group. Faced with the need to rebuilt Italian society after a 20-years dictatorship, this article argues that Malaguzzi, together with many other educators, found his inspiration first and foremost in Dewey. This fits with Malaguzzi's profile as independent thinker and voracious reader, able to distance his stand from mainstream communist views.

While there is no direct prove for this inspiration, because Malaguzzi references to Dewey are too general and broad, the review of their stands brings compelling evidence. Dewey's views on participation, on individual and on society leaves lasting traces in Malaguzzi's writings and ideas since the mid-Fifties, and not just in general terms, but deep in the structural pillars of his mindset. The quality participation asked for by Dewey is incarnated in the REA, since «it recognizes and enacts the needs and rights of children, families, teachers and school workers, actively to feel part of a solidarity of practice and ideals» (Malaguzzi in Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, 353)

Yet it is in the vision of individualism within a society context and the dialogic approach between these two dimensions where Dewey's legacy is more evident. Individuals as protagonists of their own destiny, but within a 'solidarity', a social contest respectful of everyone's contribution, able to enhance personal research and foster 'freedom of intelligence'. This issue could be further investigated, analyzing the connections between Dewey's and Malaguzzi's esthetic of learning. An analysis of Malaguzzi's earlier writings and unpublished REA materials could prove his debt toward Dewey further.

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