This paper is taken from

Citizenship Education: Europe and the World Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network

London: CiCe 2006

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 899764 66 6

The Pedagogy of Reggio Emilia: Developmentally appropriate practice through the looking glass of Dewey's democracy

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Introduction

Education has been regarded as one of the pillars of democracy. At the same time in many people's minds and by their own experiences, schools have been rather undemocratic institutions. Simultaneously, most societies rely on schools to prepare students for participation in futuristic democratic actions.[1]

> 'A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.' (John Dewey, 1916. p. 87)

So wrote John Dewey at the beginning of the last century, concerned for democracy in an ever-changing world. In his spirit and in this paper, democracy is understood as: a community of people living with common understandings and trust, believing in every person's right to belong and to participate in collective commitments. The purpose of this study is to look at two educational trends: a developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and the philosophy of Reggio Emilia (Reggio). Both which acknowledge Dewey as a source for their democratic views.

John Dewey

Dewey has influenced western education through his philosophy. He wrote substantially on education and democracy from a wide perspective. One of his key concepts is education *through action*, meaning, being a part of society and participating in the same society, through action. In schools for young children this can be translated into children participating in shaping their world, having a voice and being looked upon *not* as children or citizens in waiting or as citizens of undefined future but as becoming citizens or citizens in making. In the same sense Rogers (1961/1995) wrote on how a person never *is* (definite) but always *is becoming*. The concept *becoming* is used to describe a belief that there should be space for everybody to become more: to evolve. In a school sense it means schools where children deal with issues that concern them, their world and experiences bad or good. It can be; sickness, happiness, war or terror, poverty, reading or writing. Things that usually are not on the early childhood educational agenda will be there; if children themselves place them on the agenda, if the pedagogues see that they are issues that concern children. It is based on the post-modern view that children and teachers are co-constructors of knowledge, on the image of the new childhood, a childhood where children are 'contributors to the making and re-making of the social

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order' (Mayall, 2003, p. 14). Childhood is here acknowledged as a socially constructed idea.

Dewey (1916) believed in the importance of connectedness and context in education and he thought those things had greater meaning for children than subject learning. Learning through action is a way to connect children with the world at large and a way to learn of things in context. Dewey underscored the importance of looking at the child as living in the present, not mainly as candidates for the future. He worried over schools that were so occupied with preparation for the future that they forgot the effect of today on tomorrow. The importance of the future was in his mind but if, as he promoted, education is looked upon as growth, it must realize present possibilities and thus make individuals better prepared for the future.

Dewey (1916) emphasised the importance of the shared values that society has built up and the value of free associations between groups, ideas and individuals. But he also claimed that 'the conception of education as social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind' (1916, p.97). In his own words an idea of democratic society is reflected as:

'A society which make provision for participation in it goods of all its members on equal terms and which secure flexible readjustments of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationship and control.' (Dewey 1916, p.99)

In today's literature the manifestation of democracy in education appears in writing on citizenship and citizenship education. According to Osler and Starkey (2005) a democratic school provides opportunities for a wide range of communication and collaboration. It is a school where human rights are woven into the fabric of everyday life, were people are responsible to and for others as well as oneself.

Another way to describe a democratic school is that it is a school in *becoming*, a school that is ready to define itself again and again. It is ready to reinvent itself according to new ideas, the culture and the society that it is situated in, on the base of human rights and human equality. A school that is ready to look at children, parents, teachers and society as a whole, not as fragmented pieces. Schools that in the spirit of the UN Children Rights Act want children to be involved in shaping their life, that acknowledge children's participation in forming the curriculum and are sensitive to the children's own culture and perspectives.[2]

Dewey (1902/1973, 469) warned against a fragmented view of the child. He said that it is easier to look at certain conditions in separateness, to look at something in the nature of the child to try to find for example a problem and then insist on this finding as the key to the whole problem. This he said will lead to conflicting terms, the child vs. the curriculum, the individual vs. the social. Even though Dewey warned against such tendency at the beginning of the last century it was too much of a challenge for the

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[2] See for example ODEC 2001 on *Starting strong in early childhood*.

sciences not to do exactly that. Today we have movements in early childhood education built on the scientific view of looking at the child as separate components.

Reggio Emilia

Reggio has over the last four decades developed in the red triangle of Italy, in the city Reggio Emilia. It is based on the image of the child as a whole being, as part of society, as being interdependent. OECD chose Reggio to be presented as one of five outstanding approaches to early childhood education for an international conference in Stockholm 2003 (ODEC, 2004).

The roots of Reggio Emila are partly to be found in the desire of the people of Reggio to never again have to face fascism and partly in older socialistic traditions of Northern Italy (Rinaldi, 2006). After the Second World War the first early childhood centre[3] was opened with the aim to raise children to be critical thinkers and the guardians of democracy (Malaguzzi, 1998). The method took on a new life in 1963 when the municipality of Reggio asked Loris Malaguzzi[4] to lead the educational work and be protagonist for their dream. Malaguzzi was influenced by many thinkers, among them Dewey, Piaget,[5] Makarenko, and Vygotsky (Malaguzzi, 1998; Soler and Miller 2003). A value-based view of the society as well as the image of the child as competent, full of possibilities and a protagonist in its own life has been evident from the beginning. Those are well described in Rinaldi's[6] (2006) words; 'we have committed ourselves to building a present which is aware of the past and responsible for the future' (p. 170). This will be built on an image of the child as a citizen of life and 'bearer here and now, of rights, of values, of culture: the culture of childhood' (p.171). Rinaldi (2006) also believed that schools should be public and for everybody: she worries over schools based on segregation, such as faith or gender. She says, 'it is a big risk if children grow up reflecting only on themselves, with only one particular group. My idea of school is a pluralistic concept' (p. 208).

In Reggio, the concept, *pedagogy of listening* has been developed through *pedagogical documentation* (PD). It is a tool developed for the purpose of studying children's learning and thinking. Part of the PD is to enable pedagogues, to reflect on experiences with children, parents and others from wider society. The importance of this aspect of the PD is well defined in Dahlberg and Moss (2005), when they say:

'Pedagogical documentation is a vital tool for the creation of a reflective and democratic practice. It also contributes to the democratic projects of early childhood institutions by providing means for pedagogues and other to engage in dialogue and negotiation about pedagogical work.' (p. 155-6)

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[3] In Italy those centres or schools are for children aged 1-6.

[4] A teacher and psychologist, later consider being one of greater educational philosopher of the century.

[5] Malaguzzi did visit the Piaget-foundation in Geneva. He cited both Dewey and Piaget frequently in interviews.

[6] Carlina Rinaldi took over Malaguzzi position as a pedagogical leader of Reggio after his death in 1994.

Thus, one of the keys to democracy in Reggio is PD. Through it, , an understanding and knowledge is made and shaped.

Reggio has been willing to cross borders; has been open to dialogue between and with the world at large, inviting people from the community, from other parts of the world, and from other disciplines. Dialogue in Reggio is 'understood as having a capacity for transformation … where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result' (Rinaldi 2006, p. 184). There is no certainty as to where the crossing of the border can lead, and that is a part of its attractiveness. I compare the idea of crossing borders to Dewey's ideas on free associations, but taken further. The explanation being that societies of today are more plastic and the borders blurrier. Cross bordering in Reggio is the legacy of Malaguzzi.
He said:

'Talk about education …cannot be confined to its literature. Such talk, which is also political, must continuously address major social changes and transformations in economy, sciences, art and human relationship and customs.' (Malaguzzi 1998 p.60)

Malaguzzi wanted to and did reach out to different worlds, to be in living dialogue with both the micro and the macro worlds, with scientists from different paths.

As stated above, Reggio has it roots partly in developmental psychology. According to Dahlberg and Moss (2006), educators in Reggio used Piaget's ideas on the importance of the role of the teacher in organising learning in the beginning. At the same time they were aware of how his ideas isolated the child and ignored the importance of a dialogue, the results being a fragmented view of the child. In Reggio's search for other perspectives they came to a socio-cultural view of education, based on Vygotsky and Bruner, which still stands strong. In Reggio there is a strong belief that childhood is a socially constructed concept and, accordingly, children and teachers are co-constructors of knowledge and society.

The main working method in Reggio is through projects that are based on PD. The projects can be very complex, not only the methods that are used but also the ideas that children are working on. Each project can take on different images and levels. The projects go well in hand with Dewey's ideas on learning in action and through projects. Dahlberg and Moss (2006) use *rhizome*[7] to describe how complex a project can be and in how many directions and levels it can be taken.

Rinaldi (2006) declares that the values that people treasure in Reggio are distant from the values that seem to be going around the world today, those based on individualism, egoism, money and so forth. But because those values are so highly held it is even more important that places for young children educate towards human values. Rinaldi states, 'that if school is a place of education *all* the places within schools, *all* the people there

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[7] A rhizome is a thick underground horizontal stem that produces roots and has shoots that develop into new plants, there is no hierarchy of roots or stems – French philosophers Gilles Deluze and Felix Guttari developed this concept to give a sense how new ideas are born and connected in this space between; they were getting tired of the classic metaphor of a tree with roots.

are educational, they are "educating"' (p. 150). If this perspective is transferred to democracy, in a democratic school, *all* places and *all* experiences should support and promote democracy. This is a view that is actually based on a deep democratic belief: on the certainty that in democratic societies everybody is committed to the mutual welfare of all humans.

There is not much criticism on Reggio to be found in the literature. Amongst them is Browne, who has criticised Reggio for theoretically not acknowledging 'gender issues and the concept of gender equity' (2004. p, 50). In other words being struck with gender-blindness. Browne supports her claiming with her own observation of children's free play, which she observed to be in traditional gender discourse. Others, like Johnson (1999), worry over Reggio becoming the new early childhood education *regime of truth.*[8]

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

What is perfectly acceptable for one age group is inappropriate for another because it does not match the child's developmental level. (Bredekamp, 1987)

DAP is rooted in the USA, during the nineteen eighties, at a time when people believed that American children were falling behind (western societies) academically speaking. As a result, many wanted to push the primary school curriculum that emphasised formal instructions and academic skills down to programs for younger children. DAP appeared as a defence against that trend, from NAEYC, a very powerful organisation in the US and the biggest association for early childhood education in the world (Bredekamp, 1987; Edwards, 2005). When the above quote, from the first DAP, is read in this light it leaves the reader with a contextualised understanding of the content. DAP is founded on the idea that the curriculum is supposed to evolve around the child, its needs development and independency but also that it should be integrated and look at the child as a whole (Bredekamp, 1987). It has its philosophical roots in progressive child centred education (Edwards, 2005). From the beginning two key concepts were dominant, that of *age* and *individual appropriateness*. Later, after much criticism, a third dimension was added, that of *cultural appropriateness*. DAP is written as sketches of what each age *is like* and what is *appropriate* and *inappropriate* for that age (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). It presents a fragmented view of the child.

McMullen and Alat (2002) state that there is general acceptance that if early childhood programs and environments built solidly upon the principles of DAP it will ensure high quality education for young children. DAP is occupied with working with children's individuality, self assertiveness and choices, highly held values in Anglo-American societies (Penn, 2005). The importance of the right classroom setting and the role of the teacher in making sure that the child has appropriate choices are stressed (Bredekamp 1987). DAP initially had a lot of critics and in response a new version was published in

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[8] As described by Foucault, see for example Mac Naughton (2005) for discussion in early childhood context.

1997. In the newer version cultural awareness is promoted and according to New (2000) it has taken notice of and is filled with examples from Reggio.

The following statement from NACEY about DAP is a telling one. It illuminates a strong belief in psychological sciences and a universalistic view of humans. It offers a certainty about which way to go and it does not leave the reader with much of a doubt.
 Developmentally appropriate practice is based on knowledge about how children develop and learn. To guide their decisions about practice, all early childhood teachers need to understand the developmental changes that typically occur in the years from birth through age 8 and beyond, variations in development that may occur, and how best to support children's learning and development during these years. (NACEY, 1996 p.5)

Dunn and Kontos (1997) are strong defenders of DAP, and point out that children in DAP classrooms are likely to have a higher level of cognitive function than children coming from academic classrooms. They state that DAP creates a positive classroom climate conducive to children's healthy emotional development. Henniger (as sited in Mac Naughton 2003) explains the role of the teacher in DAP as instead of first determining what children should learn, the first duty of the teacher is to understand the class developmental abilities, and from there, form the curriculum. Mac Naughton (2003) on other hand argues, that DAP regulates and governs parents and teachers views on early childhood. They get the picture that DAP is based on a set of facts about the child. It feeds into people's previous faith in science. Mac Naughton also maintains that DAP 'can reinforce conservative social ideas and knowledge because educators often act as cultural gatekeepers of what children should know' (p. 177). In other words, teachers don't touch issues that are uncomfortable to them; issues that are maybe part of minority children's experiences, but instead favour their own ideas of a 'right childhood'. Others point out that DAP reinforces stereotyping, does not acknowledge the unique capabilities of individual children, and lets the teacher be the owner or definer of the children's cultural world (se for ex, Jipson, 1998; Canella, 1997; Dahlberg et al 1999)

According to Penn (2005), DAP is much quoted by large international organisations like the World Bank. The problem Penn perceives with DAP is that it is only interested in micro-level intervention. It proclaims to be context-free and universal but is based on sciences and research is almost all carried out in the US. She wonders why to promote a program like DAP that looks past children's social and economical situations, and looks past children's accesses to early childhood education.

Concluding discussion

I started this paper with a statement about schools being the keepers of democracy, but at the same time regarded as undemocratic institutions by many. I believe that democratic education is possible if it builds upon values that promote and respect human rights and diversities. I have given a short overview of two different paths to early childhood education. It may be that both share some starting points (Dewey, Piaget), but as we know from chaos theory, you only have to alter little bits at some point in order to change the whole system. Choices people make are in a way such alternatives. Malaguzzi, his colleagues and the civil society in Reggio chose to cross borders between professions and between systems. With that choice they altered the equation. The people

that created DAP from the progressive movement background and psychological body of knowledge made other choices, and got another equation. The main difference in the equations is to be found in the images of the child those two paths present: As one promotes interdependency the other independency. As one promotes possibilities the other is determined[9].

Both DAP and Reggio has greatly influenced the pedagogy of early childhood. Both have supporters all over the world that are dedicated to spreading the 'word' of the 'new utopia' coming true or the 'right' way of doing things (Dahlberg et al. 1999; McMullen et al., 2005: Walsh 2005). However, according to Goffin (2000), neither completely fulfils the criteria for a fully-fledged curriculum. The explanation maybe found in that:

> Both DAP and Reggio present themselves not so much as definitive curriculum approaches to early childhood education as they do theoretical and philosophical frameworks aimed at describing possible methods associated with the task of educating young children within a given context. (Edwards, 2005)

Yet at the same time one can hardly imagine a bigger gap in the end 'product' in the form of early childhood education. In my view, one runs toward uncertainty, a space were everything is changeable but at the same time is rooted in political values as well as developmental theories (Reggio). The other (DAP) is rooted in values and confidence in sciences, but has at the same time a determined view of the child and its abilities, a view that is manifested in the word *appropriate*.

In table 1 I compare Reggio, DAP and Dewey with key democratic concepts that I deem important to be able to understand the similarities and the differences between the two approaches and how far or close they are from Dewey. The table is mostly self-explanatory.

Dewey argued that education can't be free of context and has to have a vision of society. As DAP is presented it seems to have missed out on that lecture in the first round – in the second round the cultural awareness got on board, however it remains to be seen if it will be followed with a vision of societies. In parts of the world DAP is considered to be the *regime of truth*. It has gotten thus by being sheltered by organisations like NAEYC and the World Bank and because of the need of governments for accountability in education. Belief in the need of accountability goes hand in hand with a strong faith in sciences and positivism. So when powerful organisations like the World Bank promote universal values and images of children that are *minority world* [10] images, it can lead to discomfort among people who don't have the background where this image is developed.

One can wonder if seemingly growing a trend to separate children and send them to segregated schools is based partly on the concern of minority groups as to what happens to their values in the majority school system, or if minority groups in majority societies

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[9] See appendix A for quick overview of Dewey, Reggio and DAP.
[10] Minority world is understood here as the western world, see for ex. Dahlberg et al. 1999; Penn 2005; Mac Naughton, 2005.

Table 1 Comparing Dewey, Reggio and DAP

Concepts	Dewey	Reggio Emilia	DAP
Image of the child:	The child is a constructer of own meaning – individual. As a whole being.	The child is capable and prognostic in own life – is part of society. As a whole being.	The child is vulnerable – is individual. As fragments that makes the whole.
Gender		Gender blind	Gender blind
Roots.	Social democracy.	Rooted in socialism.	Rooted in psychology.
Role of the teacher:	Defining the environment and organise learning opportunities.	Be a co-constructer of knowledge and the curriculum. The environment is considered to be the third teacher.	Get to know the child and to organise the environment according to her/his appropriate developmental needs.
The curriculum:	Is an open and constructed in context with experiences and activities.	Chaotic, emerging and open – not planned. Emerge from children's issues and experiences. (PD).	Organised, planned from key experiences and developmental needs of each child.
Socio-cultural:	Important.	Important.	Important.
Societies role:	Important.	Children are part of communities. Interdependency is valued.	Children are part of their cultural background. Independency is valued.
Children's own culture –		Important.	Unimportant.
Controversial issues to be addressed:	Likely	Partly likely –within a certain frame, (gender blindness)	Unlikely.
Citizenship:	The child is citizen in making.	The child is citizen in making.	The Child is citizen of the future.
Accountability:		Evaluation in form of documentation, not official evaluation system.	National evaluation system in form of accreditation.
Access:		The role of society to open access for all partly paid for through taxes.	The role of non-profit and profit organisation. For low income families partly (even fully) paid by tax money.

are concerned about being marginalised into cultures that they don't understand or approve of. Here I am for example talking about values that are held high in the home but can be in contrast with values that the school system holds high (see for example Brooker, 2005). I question if a philosophy that aims at a universal understanding of childhood and the child, and which was supposed to lead to a better quality of living for all, has instead led to distrust and segregation.

From a democratic perspective, which program should be promoted? From the description of democratic schools I think DAP has had a tremendous influence on the early childhood world. It had an important impact at the time it was first developed as a defence tool. At the same time I don't think it is enough anymore. It needs to be

developed *from* the word appropriate. The concept is stalling pedagogical possibilities. On the other hand, I believe the answer is partly to be found within a philosophy like Reggio, which has a strong vision of *their* society, where a 'right' image of the child is contested, where emphasis is on the interplay between different aspects of experiences and ethics and the socio-cultural environment. I believe that we need schools where the philosophy is the joint property of the children, teachers, parents, politicians and society as whole. Where the identity is not *either/or*, but rather a hybrid where *both* are key concepts. I believe that the shield of democracy lies in pluralistic schools where philosophy in the spirit of Dewey is living a good life.

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