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In *The Ethics in Loris Malaguzzi’s Philosophy*, Alfredo Hoyuelos, professor in the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy in the Public University of Navarra (Spain), continues his investigation into the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of Loris Malaguzzi’s approach and its influence on the Reggio Emilia schools. Hoyuelos has visited Reggio Emilia and utilized documents, interviews, and observations to write his doctoral thesis, “*Loris Malaguzzi’s philosophy and pedagogical work and their repercussion on children’s education,*” which also as the basis for this text.

For readers unfamiliar with the Reggio Emilia schools and how they operate, this book would probably not be considered an “entry-level” text. It is not designed as a primer for the Reggio Emilia schools or as a guide for teachers to derive curricular ideas, lesson plans, or environmental classroom designs (e.g., Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1995). The book stays true to its title by exploring Malaguzzi’s philosophy through the filter of ethics. Readers already familiar with the basic components and operation of the Reggio Emilia schools will gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the philosophical structure, contexts, and reference points from which those schools were formed.

Hoyuelos explicitly mentions his deep interest and passion towards Malaguzzi’s work and offers this early disclaimer:

Researching and writing about Malaguzzi is by no means an easy task, because he is a character whom we have met, cared for and keep on loving. This inevitable emotions [sic] has contaminated our way of reading, studying, listening to his recordings and even interviewing the various people who enthusiastically shared fragments of his life. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges that this text deals with derives from the affective and intellectual impossibility of placing ourselves outside of Malaguzzi in order to study him. We cannot step away from him and then approach him objectively, nor can we simply stay too close within Malaguzzi to understand him in his complexity (p. 27).

The book is divided into five chapters and, collectively, they conjure up an image of a mighty Malaguzzi tree. The reader is exposed to the philosophical “roots” that helped grow Malaguzzi’s work and formed the “trunk” of his own philosophy, which further “branched” out through the educational experiences at Reggio Emilia and the examination and extension of his work by other scholars.

Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to the text and establishes the structural analysis utilized to review the source material and its resulting interpretive framework. Hoyuelos identifies and reveals three main threads in the Malaguzzi philosophy: Ethics (Etica), Aesthetics
(Estetica), and Politics (Politica). Furthermore, each of these three threads has in turn three guiding “Principles,” with each principle having between two and six “Strategies”—which illustrate how these principles are practically demonstrated (p. 31). Due to space constraints, Hoyuelos states that only the thread of ethics will be discussed in this text.

“Our Protagonist”, Chapter 2, serves as a brief historical background on Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994). This background not only addresses some significant events in Malaguzzi’s life but also prominently features his varied influences: “Contemporary and previous pedagogues and psychologists are present in his work and philosophical approach, as are philosophers, historians, artists, sociologists, scientists, linguists, poets, and anthropologists” (p. 37). More than two dozen notable names are mentioned, including Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, Marx, Rousseau, Freire, Picasso, Bronfenbrenner, Mead, Peirce, Heidegger, and Sartre. At only 7 pages, this chapter leaves the reader wanting more. While the intent of the text is not a biographical exploration of Loris Malaguzzi, many of the names mentioned in this chapter are not discussed in any real detail, here or later in the text, as to how Malaguzzi perceived them or what portions of their work he utilized to formulate his own ideas. Still, the chapter does establish a “root” system to acknowledge where Malaguzzi was intentionally or unintentionally “searching” in order to shape and develop his own philosophy.

Chapter 3 revisits the structural analysis and interpretive framework presented in Chapter 1. This time, the narrative presents the key terminology, their operational definitions, and their philosophical reference points. This in-depth discussion addresses the concepts of ethics, principles, ends, values, strategies, and performances, as well as their connection and inter-relationship. Hoyuelos states, “It will become apparent how these concepts are useful when reviewing the different performances or strategies that Malaguzzi implemented to address the principles (ends and values) that we have referred to as ethical” (p. 55).

“The ethics in Loris Malaguzzi’s philosophy and pedagogical work” is the title and topic of Chapter 4. This chapter represents the “main course” of the Malaguzzi
philosophy “meal”, as it represents approximately 85% of the book (270 pages). Hoyuelos begins by outlining the Ethics component and then methodically goes point-by-point discussing its principles and strategies.

In this chapter, we implement the system of ethical principles and strategies that we have constructed to approach Malaguzzi’s philosophy and pedagogical work. As a system, we emphasize, every part or element is interdependently related to every one of the other elements. It is what Malaguzzi himself refers to as relational pedagogy. (p. 58).

Hoyuelos additionally reminds the reader again that Ethics, while inseparable from Aesthetics and Politics, is the only area being discussed here in detail.

Ethical Principle 1 states that “education starts with the child’s image, an image that reveals a human being’s indetermination.” (p. 60). Its three strategies are: “The pedagogy of listening”, “Observation through research-action probes”, and “The idea of a project vs. programming.” (p. 60). Principle 1 and its strategies start with the notion that the individual must acknowledge his or her preconceived notions, images, and beliefs about children that have been influenced and developed by the different human, social, and cultural styles, as well as by the changing terrain of the historical moment. This message is consistent with, and connected to, the work of Aires (1965) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). This self-reflection provides insight into the type of relationship that adults develop with children. Through observation and listening, the adult can facilitate experiences that respect the inherent rights of children. This serves not only as a basis for interrelationships, but also provides expectations for project-driven educational opportunities for the children.

Ethical Principal 2 states that “Educating means increasing the number of possible opportunities.” (p. 60). This principle contains four strategies: “Adequate school organization”, “Small groups”, “The role of the adult”, and “Personalized distribution or sharing of responsibilities” (p. 60). Principle 2 and its strategies spotlight Malaguzzi’s ideas regarding the institution of schools and their
structure, dynamics, and operation. The message here is clearly one of reform and examines such issues as the physical environment and the location of critical environmental components, school and class size, co-teaching, and the role of all adults and their responsibility towards the children’s educational opportunities (including those generally perceived as non-teachers—e.g., maintenance staff and cooks).

Ethical Principle 3 states that “The child is an individual with historical and cultural rights.” (p. 60). Its three strategies are: “Defence [sic] of the rights of children, teachers, families and women”, “The identity of school and childhood education”, and “developing childhood rights by borrowing their voice of ‘one hundred languages’” (p. 60). Principle 3 and its strategies focus primarily on rights and advocacy. Malaguzzi outlines the notion of historical and cultural rights of children, teachers, families, and women and advocating for those rights both in the school as well as in the general society. This discussion includes an ecological approach to creating a structure to support these rights, and the influence and impact of the political realm as well as social services and social delivery systems.

Chapter 5 concludes the text’s examination of Malaguzzi’s philosophy related to the area of ethics. It will dawn on the reader that the majority of the Malaguzzi material presented has prominently focused on the child’s cognitive development. With it being referenced that Malaguzzi’s influences were diverse, it leaves the reader wondering what his views were towards other areas of development. For example, terms like trust, autonomy, initiative, identity, competence, and historical moment are utilized and integrated throughout the narrative, that it is hard not to see parallels to the work of Erik Erikson (1950 & 1975). Hoyuelos informs the reader that while social elements were of interest to Malaguzzi, these elements did not really surface until toward the end of his life, so we only find a few ideas in his work related to the “emotional aspects of childhood” (p. 333).

No theory or philosophy is without its challenges and Malaguzzi’s is no different. Hoyuelos, however, seems to avoid offering a critical commentary to Malaguzzi’s work. Significant portions of the text present Malaguzzi’s
critique of other theoretical frameworks, like Piaget, Vygotsky, Gardner, and Dewey, but these view points are not balanced by any real critique of Malaguzzi’s own concepts and ideas.

There are a few spots in the text where critical components are mentioned, but the subject is not explored in any real depth. For example, Hoyuelos presents the idea that in Malaguzzi’s opinion, “…there is no handicap, no conception of children with deficiencies or the acknowledgement of problematic children due to their different social background.” (p. 94). This is obviously a point that many would take exception to and offer a different opinion or a critique of Malaguzzi’s idea. Hoyuelos states that, “This is a topic that we will not develop further” (p. 94), and refers the reader—via footnote—to a Malaguzzi source. It would have been helpful to see excerpts or quotes from this source, directly in the text, and to hear Hoyuelos’s opinion and interpretation of this subject. A quote from Susanna Mantovani (1998) is presented, though, as one example of a counter-view, but the content of the quote really just expresses that Malaguzzi did not agree with her that some children requiring special needs might exist.

Another example includes Hoyuelos referencing a “scandal” that arose surrounding excerpts of children’s work that were read at a conference in Barcelona on June 10, 1988. The audience reacted to the young children’s words and themes of love, boyfriends/girlfriends, kissing, holding hands, marriage, having babies, and adultery. While Hoyuelos does include a quote from Malaguzzi and the passages in question (written by three children), he offers no personal commentary or interpretation on the matter.

This less than critical eye could be attributed to Hoyuelos’s self-disclosed enthusiastic and emotional connection to the Malaguzzi philosophy (p. 27). A balanced analysis is generally preferred but, in this case, does not discount or distract from the depth and importance of the Malaguzzi material that is presented.

In fact, one of the main strengths of Hoyuelos’s text is the large amount of primary Malaguzzi sources that he utilizes—which speak to his investigative integrity as a
researcher. There are over 60 citations of Malaguzzi’s work utilized and numerous quotes from these sources are integrated throughout the text and are presented in considerable length. For many readers, this will be their first exposure to these passages because of their translation into English (the text is translated by Roberto Pisano). Hoyuelos offers summation, interpretation, and commentary to these quotes, which are both engrossing and insightful.

Additionally, these quotes and concepts reveal a fount of knowledge that demonstrate areas where Malaguzzi’s thinking had changed—as well as stayed the same—over time. They also demonstrate the critical link to practice. Hoyuelos includes descriptions of projects like the Long Jump and the Rainbow Experiment, as well as makes connections between the presented ideologies and the famous “Hundred Languages” poem. At the heart of these projects was Malaguzzi’s belief of letting the children become the actors, and not the extras (p. 200).

In looking at the full ecological scope of the Malaguzzi philosophy, the skeptic might easily point out that all this might work well in Reggio Emilia but it would never work here, we could never do that, or administrators would never go for it. In short, “…that it is impossible to copy the experience that has its anchors in a certain type of society, politics, history, economics and culture” (p. 10). While there is some truth in that statement, the challenge becomes how to translate and transfer these fundamental Malaguzzi values and concepts to other milieus without betraying their source. This text provides a good starting point in trying to address that challenge.

In summarizing Malaguzzi’s accomplishments and impact, Hoyuelos states:

It would be unfair to say that all the merits of Reggio’s experience is [sic] Malaguzzi’s. There are many people who have helped in the construction of the project and have built the thoughts and pedagogical work of Malaguzzi, while he contributed his intuition and his ideas to those people and to the experience itself. We can talk about a reciprocal co-construction. Indeed, some of Malaguzzi’s own ideas and intuitions have continued
to developed and deepened after his death. And this is the most important aspect of his legacy (p. 276-277).

With this sentiment in mind, it is hopeful that Alfredo Hoyuelos will continue his research and analysis into Malaguzzi’s philosophy and produce the follow-up companions to this text, *The Aesthetics of Loris Malaguzzi’s Philosophy* and *The Politics of Loris Malaguzzi’s Philosophy*.

References


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