

Loris Malaguzzi, democratic leader or primus inter pares

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Abstract

This article uses the life and work of one of the great educationalists of the last century, Loris Malaguzzi from Reggio Emilia, to question the concept of leadership in an education system inscribed with the values of democracy and cooperation. It asks if we should talk of ‘democratic leadership’, or whether some other concept is more appropriate. The article also poses a critical question: why do we speak so much about leadership today?, and wonders if it is related to contradictions in the neoliberal regime that has become so dominant a discourse in our times.

Keywords: Reggio Emilia, education, democracy, leadership

A call for assistance

What does it mean to be a democratic leader? Or, to be more precise, is it possible to talk about leadership in an education system deeply inscribed with the values and practices of democracy and cooperation? I ask these questions not as an expert in the field of education leadership, indeed as a self-avowed novice with no knowledge of the literature. I ask them instead as a student of early childhood education coming across an experience that has raised these questions in my mind, and who seeks assistance in answering them from those who are more expert. The article is, if you will, a call for assistance, but also a provocation.

Though not familiar with the field, I am aware that leadership in education is a subject whose time appears to have

come, a high profile concept and practice much discussed and practiced today. For example, the Institute of Education in London where I work has a ‘London Centre for Leadership in Learning’, while England has a government-supported National College for Teaching and Leadership. And there are, of course, a number of academic journals, including this one, devoted to the subject. Nor is an intense interest in leadership confined to education, but figures prominently in every field of human services.

It is, therefore, impossible to ignore the high profile accorded in this day and age to leadership in education, and its role and impact on performance. Yet at the same time, such attention generates a certain unease and scepticism. This is in part the response that any critical academic should adopt to any concept and practice, a reaction that in my case is sharpened by a Foucauldian approach, which views the contemporary prominence of leadership in education as a dominant discourse, a discourse seeking to apply a decisive influence on a particular subject, in this case education.

It [a dominant discourse] does so by projecting and imposing a ‘regime of truth’ that exercises power over our thoughts and actions, directing or governing what we see as the ‘truth’ and how we construct the world: it makes “assumptions and values invisible, turn[s] subjective perspectives and understandings into apparently objective truths, and determine[s] that some things are

self-evident and realistic while others are dubious and impractical” (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p.17). Such dominant discourses provide the mechanism for rendering reality amenable to certain kinds of actions (Miller and Rose, 1993) – and by so doing, they also exclude other ways of understanding and interpreting the world, marginalising other stories that could be told. (Moss, 2014, pp.3-4)

Put another way, dominant discourses operate as ‘regimes of truth’, determining what is held to be true: the important point being that ‘the concern here is not with what is true...[but] how some things come to count as true’ (Ball, 2015, p.4). Furthermore, what counts as true is determined not by some objective and stable set of criteria, for ‘nothing is true that is not the product of power’ (ibid.).

Leadership in education seen through this lens raises questions about why the concept is today so widely treated as self-evident, what alternatives it excludes by rendering them unspeakable and implausible, and why we speak so much about it now. In other words, what is it about our present day world and what relationships of power bring ‘leadership’ to the fore in education and counts it as true

But these general causes of unease and scepticism about leadership in education have been intensified by a particular experience, three years of work preparing an English-language book of selected writings and speeches by Loris Malaguzzi (Cagliari, Castegnetti, Giudici, Rinaldi, Vecchi and Moss, 2016). Who was Loris

Malaguzzi? And why has he provoked questions about leadership in education?

Loris Malaguzzi and the schools of Reggio Emilia

Loris Malaguzzi (1920-94) was one of the great educationalists of the last century, helping to create a system of public (or municipal) schools in his home city of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy that is, arguably, the most successful, most extensive and most sustained example of radical or progressive education that has ever been. A strong claim, but difficult to deny I think when it is realised that today there are 47 schools in the city (33 managed by the *comune* (city council) itself, and 14 provided by co-operatives under agreements with the *comune*); and that they have managed to maintain an innovative, dynamic and creative culture of pedagogical work for more than 50 years.

If Malaguzzi and the schools of Reggio Emilia may not be familiar to many readers it is because he and they are concerned with the education of children below compulsory school age, from birth to 6 years. In the fragmented world of education, that puts them beyond the knowledge and awareness of most educationalists, who are involved with primary, secondary and higher education, and who may well see early childhood education mainly as a form of preparation for what follows, necessary perhaps but not of great interest to education proper. But in the field of early childhood

education, Reggio Emilia has attracted global attention and a worldwide following, becoming widely recognised as one of the most important experiences in this sector of education. The city receives a constant stream of study groups from many countries, while its exhibition has been touring the world since 1988.

Space precludes going in detail into the pedagogical ideas and practices that have created Reggio's distinct identity (for those wanting to read more deeply into the subject, see Rinaldi 2006; Vecchi 2010; Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2012; Cagliari et al., 2016). However, a few key features should be mentioned. Education is understood, first and foremost, as political, political in the sense that it is always about making choices between conflicting alternatives. One of the most important choices concerns the image of the child – who do we think the child is? From the answer to that question everything else – policy, provision, practice; structure and culture – must necessarily follow.

Of course every educational policy and service is based on a particular image, but one that is usually implicit and unacknowledged; no national or international policy documents that I have ever seen mention, let alone answer, the question. But Reggio does, recognising that the child's image, the choice that is made, has to be explicit and public, and therefore subject to discussion and argument. Malaguzzi, for example, insisted that 'a declaration [about the image of the child] is not only a necessary act of

clarity and correctness, it is the necessary premise for any pedagogical theory, and any pedagogical project' (Loris Malaguzzi, from Cagliari et al, 2016, p.374)

Reggio has always been very clear about its image, the image of the 'rich child':

there are rich children and poor children. We [in Reggio Emilia] say all children are rich, there are no poor children. All children whatever their culture, whatever their lives are rich, better equipped, more talented, stronger and more intelligent than we can suppose. (ibid., p.397)

These are children born with a 'hundred languages' (the term used in Reggio to suggest the many and diverse ways children have of expressing themselves and relating to the world), competent and determined from birth to make meaning of the world, children who request 'rich intelligence in others, rich curiosity in others, a very high and advanced capacity for fantasy, imagination, learning and culture in others'. Rich children are protagonists, not empty vessels to be filled but 'active in constructing the self and knowledge through social interactions and inter-dependencies' (ibid., p.377), children who are not bearers of needs, but bearers of rights, values and competencies.

This image of the child makes strong demands on the adults who live with them, but also on the pedagogy practiced in schools. Malaguzzi was quite clear about the pedagogy he did *not* want, what he called 'prophetic pedagogy', which knows everything before-

hand, knows everything that will happen, knows everything, does not have one uncertainty, is absolutely imperturbable. It contemplates everything and prophesies everything, sees everything, sees everything to the point that it is capable of giving you recipes for little bits of actions, minute by minute, hour by hour, objective by objective, five minutes by five minutes. This is something so coarse, so cowardly, so humiliating of teachers' ingenuity, a complete humiliation for children's ingenuity and potential. (ibid., p.421)

This is pedagogy reduced to a simple equation of predetermined inputs and outputs, obsessed with achieving preordained and linear stages of development ('let us take stages and throw them out the window', Malaguzzi suggests) and learning goals. It is a pedagogy of certainty, predictability and intense control. And it is a pedagogy closely wed to what he termed dismissively 'testology', with its 'rush to categorise' and 'which is nothing but a ridiculous simplification of knowledge and a robbing of meaning from individual histories'.(ibid., p.378).

Reggio has instead created a very different pedagogy, a pedagogy fit for the rich child: a pedagogy of relations, listening and liberation. This is a pedagogy of children and adults working together to construct knowledge – meaning-making through processes of building, sharing, testing and revising theories, always in dialogic relationship with others. And it is a pedagogy that loves and desires the unexpected, the unpredictable, that val-

ues wonder and surprise. The strength of Reggio, Malaguzzi believed, came precisely from this fact that every other week, every other fortnight, every month, something unexpected, something that surprised us or made us marvel, something that disappointed us, something that humiliated us, would burst out in a child or in the children. But this was what gave us our sense of an unfinished world, a world unknown, a world we ought to know better. (ibid., p.392)

And this had major implications for all those working with children, for 'to be capable of maintaining this gift of marvelling and wonder is a fundamental quality in a person working with children' (ibid.). If prophetic pedagogy 'does not have one uncertainty', then pedagogy for the rich child calls for educators able to work with, indeed to relish, uncertainty – ours, Malaguzzi declared, is 'a profession of uncertainty' (ibid., p.322).

To state that educating young children is a profession of uncertainty is not, however, the end of the matter. Reggio has high and demanding expectations of workers in its municipal schools, but matches these expectations with a meticulous and constant attention to the conditions needed to work with rich children, a pedagogy of listening and uncertainty. The experience of this Italian city shows that radical public education is not only possible but sustainable, but cannot be left simply to chance and its own devices. Organisation is vital, organisation that is intelligent and at the service of values.

Malaguzzi insisted on all workers in schools – teachers and auxiliary staff – having proper pay and time for professional development and other 'non-contact' activities, creating 'the conditions for re-evaluating and valuing their contributions' (ibid., p.210). And in 1972 he presided over the production by the city of the *Regolamento delle scuole comunali dell'infanzia* (Rulebook for municipal schools), specifying a raft of conditions to support the development of good pedagogical work. These included: a support team of *pedagogistas* (workers with a psychology or pedagogy degree, each supporting a small group of schools) and psychologists; the provision of *ateliers* and *atelieristas* (art workshops and educators with an arts qualification) in schools; two teachers working together in each class; regular professional development for all educators (teachers, *atelieristas*, cooks, auxiliaries); valuing all environments indoor and outdoor as spaces of learning, including kitchens, bathrooms and gardens; and ensuring priority access for children with special rights (the term adopted in Reggio Emilia for children with disabilities). Last but not least, the *Regolamento* emphasised the participation not only of parents but of all citizens in their local schools, including 'social management' by regularly elected representatives of these groups plus teachers.

This last point brings me to the nub of my personal dilemma about leadership in education. Reggio Emilia and its schools are inscribed with a strong and explicit

it set of values. These include subjectivity and uncertainty; a commitment to equality and a rejection of hierarchy ('the auxiliary's role was freed so that she can study, meet and discuss on equal terms with teachers...Every residual notion of hierarchy was done away with' (ibid., p.223)); and, above all, cooperation and democracy. Democracy and cooperation are expressed in organisational terms, including social management of schools by elected representatives of parents, other local citizens and teachers, and the running of schools on a cooperative basis, i.e. non-hierarchically and without school heads. But democracy and cooperation are also understood as values that should permeate all practices and relationships, an integral part of the culture of the schools which are to be, in Malaguzzi's words, 'living centres of open and democratic culture' (ibid., p.180).

Malaguzzi's role with the schools of Reggio Emilia

The *comune* of Reggio Emilia opened its first municipal school – a *scuola dell'infanzia* for 3 to 6-year-olds – at the end of 1963. The number of these schools increased in subsequent years, while a new type of school, the *asilo nido* for children under 3 years, was introduced in 1973. Malaguzzi had trained and worked as a teacher, in primary, secondary and adult education, then subsequently undertook a course in psychology. He came to work for the *comune* in 1951, at its

newly opened and innovative centre for school-age children manifesting psychological problems, but he also contributed to the pedagogical reform of the *comune's* summer camps for children. When the city opened its first school, it turned to Malaguzzi to oversee this new venture, with the title of Pedagogical Consultant. Later, as his role evolved, he became Director of the municipal schools.

What did his role involve? It was highly complex and multi-faceted, well-illustrated by the documents in the book of his writings and speeches. So, one moment he is the administrator, the head of the emerging early childhood service in Reggio Emilia, writing to the Mayor, other city politicians or officials or to schools: about problems with the construction of a new school, or arguing for the school to have an *atelier* [arts workshop]; or warning against the *comune* assuming responsibility for a sub-standard Church-run school; or proposing measures to school staff to implement the *comune's* new *Regolamento*; or chiding some schools for failing to ensure representation at meetings. The next moment he is the educator, organising series of lectures or other events for parents and teachers, in which he also often participates as a teacher (for example in 1965 reference is made to 'Pedagogical Novembers', a programme of talks on pedagogical issues, open to families and educators, and featuring presentations from leading figures in Italian education - including Malaguzzi, who organised these events in Reggio). Then

he is the pedagogical director, setting out his ideas about summer camps or schools and their underlying pedagogy, to a variety of audiences, locally, regionally or nationally, but also putting these ideas to work through experimentation, in close cooperation with teachers in the municipal schools. This activity is closely connected with that of pedagogical researcher; for experiment and research are central to his idea of the identity of the school and the work of the teacher. Another time he is the student, learning from innovative work on maths of Piaget and other Swiss psychologists, reading prodigiously and widely, wanting to keep abreast of the latest thinking in many fields. While on other occasions, he is a campaigner, arguing the case for more and better services for children and families or for the defence of what has been achieved in the face of threatened cuts – all this within the wider frame of a passionate commitment to the idea of public education.

Three themes strike me when thinking about his work. First, he was an intellectual who loved the company of other intellectuals. He was a man of many interests, great curiosity and incessant border crossing, never losing his delight at encountering new ideas, new perspectives and new friends. A man who wrote poetry, loved theatre and drama, and was very well and very widely read. A man who kept abreast of the latest developments and debates in politics, economics, culture and science. A man who wanted a modern education that understood and

responded to contemporary conditions and needs and was open to contemporary thinking and knowledge – whilst never losing sight of its responsibility for the future. And a man with a strong critical faculty, applied not only to the outdated thinking and institutions that he felt were widespread in Italy, and to the organisations of which he was a member, but also to leading figures in psychology and pedagogy, many of whom he also admired greatly and took inspiration from

But these are just some of the ingredients of being an intellectual, the raw materials that enable this role. What sort of intellectual was he? The French philosopher, Michel Foucault, distinguishes between two types of intellectual. The ‘universal intellectual’, he argued, for a long period, spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all (Foucault, 1984, p.67).

But since the end of the Second World War, Foucault discerned the emergence of a new sort, the ‘specific intellectual’:

A new mode of the “connection between theory and practice” has been established. Intellectuals have become used to working, not in the modality of the “universal”, the “exemplary”, the “just-and-true-for-all”, but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them

(housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family, and sexual relations). This has undoubtedly given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles (ibid., op.68).

This description of the specific intellectual seems to me to fit Malaguzzi very well, situated as he was in the specific sector of education, aware of and engaged with its struggles, striving to establish new ways of connecting theory and practice. Moreover, he understood the teacher in this light too: in 1975 we find him telling a regional meeting of the Italian Communist Party that ‘the need for renewal requires the kind of teacher who is a new type of intellectual, a producer of knowledge connected with organised social demands’ (Loris Malaguzzi from Cagliari et al., 2016, p.210).

Second, he was a democrat, both by conviction and in practice. He passionately believed in the importance of all citizens (not just parents and teachers) participating in shaping Reggio’s educational project:

A school with the ambition of constructing its own experience and being identified with participatory values has to adapt its contents, and its working methodology and practice....It must be capable of internally living out processes and issues of participation and democracy in its inter-personal relations, in the procedures of its *progettazione* [project work] and curriculum design, in the conception and examination of its work plans, and in operations of organisational updating, while always focusing on children, par-

ents, and the *Consiglio di Gestione* [social management committee] (ibid., p.354).

He had deep respect for the competency of children and adults alike, believing they were capable of far more than the powers-that-be gave them credit for. He worked tirelessly to develop relationships of openness, equality and mutual respect between schools, teachers, parents and local communities; the schools, he believed, must be entirely open and transparent to their local neighbourhoods. He saw there were always alternatives, that needed to be recognised, respected and argued about. While his ‘management style’ was distinctively participatory. Today’s new public management calls for hierarchical structures that separate senior officials from those engaged in the everyday work of services, the former controlling the latter at a distance through a web of procedures, targets and measurements. Malaguzzi, by contrast, offers an alternative of democratic and participatory management inscribed with an ethos of cooperation and dialogue and practiced in close relationship with the front-line. He was constantly engaged with and contributing to the everyday lives of educators and children, working ceaselessly to involve children, educators and parents with his ideas and to learn with them. He did not just plan new schools and ensure their sound administration; he was constantly in them once open, taking the pedagogical pulse, engaging with all and sundry, talking and listening. When he spoke about education and schools it was

from first-hand and current experience.

Finally, he sought to create an education of movement and innovation. He constantly talks about the municipal schools being places of research and experimentation, putting new ideas and theories to work, seeking new knowledge and understandings – always involving as wide a range of participants as possible in a process of what Unger (2005) terms ‘democratic experimentalism’. The municipal schools effectively constitute an experience that consciously attempts real research and experimentation, and which has decided to debate and examine the choices made, or that could be made, with workers, families and the people.... A declared desire for pedagogical research as a permanent method realised together by teachers, auxiliary workers, families, citizens and Quartiere [neighbourhood] (Loris Malaguzzi from Cagliari et al., 2016, p.222)

This meant a pedagogy that resisted becoming static and was averse to closure, but was instead open to continuous evolution and constant renewal:

If we want contents to be a part of real contexts, part of unfolding historical events, interpreting these and acting as their protagonist, then they cannot be absolute and final and coercive. They must consist of a series of more complex and coherent hypotheses that are constantly updated and strengthened through interpreting the needs of children, families and society (inseparably woven together), and creating the biggest movement possible,

the most participation, shared responsibility, and determination. These essential issues are the support that makes contents possible, examining and guaranteeing them in a constant democratic regeneration. (ibid., p.232-3, original emphasis)

Was Malaguzzi a ‘leader’?

Given all that has been said already, this may seem a rather obvious question. One answer is that he was a leader, but a leader of a particular kind – an intellectual and democratic leader. What I describe in my introduction to the book as ‘two defining features of his role as educational leader’.

Yet I am not sure if this is the only possibly answer. I am left wondering if the term ‘leader’ is appropriate for Malaguzzi. First, because the term ‘leader’ or ‘leadership’ never crops up in the book, at least in relation to Malaguzzi and Reggio Emilia, nor are these words I have ever heard used in my conversations with educators in the city. ‘Leader’ and ‘leadership’ are not terms that seem to sit comfortably with the ethos of this pedagogical project or the character of Malaguzzi. Perhaps, but this is pure speculation, the word ‘leader’ arouses uncomfortable memories and has negative connotations, a reminder of ‘Il Duce’ (‘the leader’) as Mussolini was known, and his 20 year fascist dictatorship, an experience that Reggio’s schools deliberately set out to contest and to prevent recurring. Renzo Bonazzi, the mayor of the city during the early years of municipal school expansion, made this

clear when he told some visitors that “the fascist experience had taught them that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative to safeguards and communicate that lesson and nurture a vision of children who can think and act for themselves” (Dahlberg 2000, p.177).

And that brings me on to the second reason for my doubts. How comfortably can the concepts of ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ – and their corollary of ‘follower’ and ‘being led’ – sit in an educational project that takes democracy and cooperation as fundamental values, and makes them central to its practice? Of course a leader may try to use the trappings of democracy to secure compliance with her purposes and goals, making a point of consulting widely and building teams that share a common sense of participating in her ambitions. But here democratic language and methods are instrumentalised and put to work in the interests of power. What is the situation though if you start from a position of democracy and cooperation as fundamentals, as was the case of Reggio Emilia? Where schools themselves have no hierarchy or fixed leadership. Where there is a desire to create a participatory project, based on a recognition that ‘individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to create project, especially an educational project, everyone’s point of view is relevant in dialogue with others’ (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2004, p.29).

In such cases do we need to search for

new language to describe a new role: or perhaps old language, such as the Latin term *primus inter pares*, first among equals, a recognition of general equality within which one figure may gain a special standing due to respect and trust gained by an acknowledged authority in a particular field. Or perhaps ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ could be reclaimed to make them genuinely compatible with deep-seated values of democracy and cooperation. But to do so would mean first critically analysing their current pre-eminence in neoliberal societies and regimes of truth, going back to that Foucauldian question – why do we talk so much about leaders and leadership today?

One answer, it seems to me, is that ‘leadership’ provides a way out of a neoliberal dilemma. How is it possible to reconcile two contradictory neoliberal ends: an organisation of high efficiency, flexibility and profitability and a workforce of competitive, self-interested and highly autonomous individuals. Faced by such contradictory material, where democracy and cooperation have no place except as instrumentalised techniques, leadership becomes one of the human technologies that appears capable of achieving some sort of reconciliation, a management tool applicable to any kind of situation, a way of governing in a Deleuzian society of control.

But then as I said at the beginning, I come at this issue of leaders and leadership as a novice. Perhaps I am simply complicating things, and there is no mis-

match between being a leader and operating in a cultural climate of democracy and cooperation. Perhaps I should simply accept that Malaguzzi was a gifted leader who was responsible for an extraordinary educational experience, rather than being just one part – albeit a *primus inter pares* - of a network of people and institutions that collectively created the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia.

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