

Seeking a successor: who can light up this dark world?

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At the start of this new year of 2013 I am struggling to find something positive to hold onto. I read in The Guardian that Michael Gove is advocating the building of new schools with smaller classrooms, narrower corridors, fewer windows and no curves. He argues that not only will this save money but will allow children to learn more effectively - that is if we agree on what learning means. Then a dear friend who regularly visits students in schools is finding many examples of beginner readers, sounding out groups of letters, being asked by the teacher if the result is a real word or not.

What world is this we live in where children are being taught to decode strings of letters which cannot be read because they are not words? And today I met a fellow teacher who tells me that when music teachers or art teachers leave they are not being replaced. And the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, himself the successful son of immigrants, is now telling immigrant parents not to speak their first languages at home to their children in order to ensure that the children will learn English. Has he really never recognised that whilst first generation immigrants may struggle to acquire a new language their children will learn English with ease because it is the language of necessity, of the streets, the schools, the system, the television, the internet? So for this generation of children and young people is there no space, no light, no music, no art, no meaning, no respect, no diversity? What is there to hold on to?

After I retired I returned to some of the great thinkers in the field of education and began writing about their work in an attempt to make the sometimes very academic accessible to those not familiar with such writing. I was writing for an audience of students and practitioners in early childhood education, parents and teachers. After writing a very general book on child development, I turned to the writings of Lev Vygotsky who so much influenced me and many others in the late

1960s and beyond. He was Jewish and living in the then Soviet Union where he was denied access to many activities and facilities. He worked for many years with those with learning or physical difficulties and died very young. That book, *Introducing Vygotsky*, became the first in a series. I refused to write about Piaget because, although I recognise and celebrate the contribution he made to our understanding, I disagree with his fundamental view of both children and learning. I am delighted that other authors have just finished *Introducing Piaget*, so do look out for this in bookshops and online. I then turned to Jerome Bruner who had been born blind and whose work interested me because it was sociocultural /historical like Vygotsky's but also put an emphasis on narrative as a way of making and sharing meaning. On completion of that book I was at a loss to know what to do next and wrote a book on the importance of children's literature which was enormous fun to write. But what to do next? Then, Alison Foyle, the commissioning editor at Routledge, suggested I write *Introducing Malaguzzi*.

I had met Loris Malaguzzi in the early days before he and his work became famous and trendy. I was part of a delegation from Islington Council sent to examine what was happening in the small city of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy. People were waxing lyrical about what they had seen there. We met Malaguzzi, a softly spoken man, eager to share his passion for children, learning, art, expression, fairness, families and more. We spent a whole day with him and he talked, in Italian, and I was mesmerised. He talked of the vision he had of emancipating children from care and education dominated by the church and of women being released to study and work. He told fantastic stories about horses and tanks being found abandoned by the fleeing German army and being sold for large sums of money which was then used to start new nursery schools. In those days I spoke very little Italian but I wrote down everything he said, in English and in my version of his Italian.

We then visited one of the nursery schools and one of the nidi for babies and toddlers. I was astonished at what I saw and heard and came back to London with screeds of notes and many photographs. I saw a studio or atelier in the middle of a

school, where an artist was working and children were coming by to make their own things or just to watch. I saw mirrors on the floor and the walls and the ceiling so babies and toddlers saw their images everywhere. I heard all the adults being called teacher and saw children going out to play whenever they chose, without needing an adult to oversee them. Later, when I became involved in the training of teachers and started programmes for people with non-traditional educational backgrounds to become teaching assistants, working in the early years sector, I found that the whole world seemed to know about Reggio Emilia. One of my grandchildren in Sydney, Australia was said to be at a Reggio Emilia nursery school. Something worried me in all this. So I arranged to go back for another look, but by the time this happened Malaguzzi was dead and the nursery schools had become so popular it was almost impossible to get to see them.

On this second visit I was lucky to see the new *Raggio di Luce* (or Ray of Light) installed in the building dedicated to the memory of Malaguzzi and an attempt to change the initially art-inspired idea of the atelier into a science-inspired laboratory. By this time there were more and more regions in Italy developing their own regional and culturally distinct versions of Reggio Emilia. For example, in one area the focus was on story-making and story-telling. In my brief discussion with people working there it became evident that they shared my feeling that those visiting the provision and seeing the fantastic artwork being produced by the children, went back to their workplaces in Syria or Sydney or Singapore and set up trying to replicate what they had seen.

It was clear that many had missed the crucial facts about the Reggio provision: it is rooted in its own culture and history; it arose out of Malaguzzi's attempts to wrest the care and education of young children from the hands of the church and put it in the hands of the community itself; there is no curriculum that can be exported; it is deeply situated in communities which value education and have been prepared over three or more generations to put public money into the provision. The project involves entire communities, open debate, a willingness to be criticised and to defend. So Malaguzzi became and remains a beacon of hope. Emerging from the truly terrible effects of fascism and repression, he was determined to fight for and

with women for their rights and the rights of their children. For me his model is essentially political and just.

So now I propose to write the next book in the *Introducing* series, this time about a great Brazilian thinker and educator, Paulo Freire. His starting point was the poor and illiterate adults he encountered in the early years of his career. Analysing the effects of both poverty and illiteracy on their self-images and the quality of their lives he came to understand that if you can't read you can't make sense of the world or play a meaningful part in it. He was sent into exile for many years but continued to write and teach and think and I was lucky enough to hear him talk at the Institute of Education about a decade ago. So now I am thinking about the links I am finding between being a small child making enormous efforts to make sense of the world, using all means possible and being an adult denied access to one of the most important ways of making sense of the world – reading and writing.

Freire, Malaguzzi, Vygotsky and Bruner all recognised the things in their societies and communities that needed to be addressed if equity and justice and access were to be achieved. **Who will fulfill this role in our current troubled world?**

References

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*The title of this books is borrowed from the work of Paulo Freire.

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