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"Fine designs" from Italy: Montessori education and the Reggio Emilia approach

[Montessori Life, Winter 2003](#) by [Edwards, Carolyn Pope](#)

Italy is not a huge country, nor one that dominates research in scientific areas like biotechnology or computer science; but in the particular field of early childhood, it can be described as a kind of gifted, creative giant. Italians have always revered beauty, architecture, painting, cuisine, and creative design. In a similar fusion of art and science, they have produced two of the 20th century's most innovative and influential leaders in early education, along with their methods of pedagogy and philosophies of education. The two figures were Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994).

Both Montessori education and the Reggio Emilia approach provide strong alternatives to traditional education and inspiration for progressive educational reform in the United States and around the world. Because they seem to share many common elements of philosophy and practice, people wonder, "But how are these approaches different, exactly? Don't they have a lot of similarities?"

This article provides an overview and comparison of the two approaches, to introduce and highlight key points of similarity and difference. What were their historical origins, foundational philosophical premises, and concepts about child development and learning? How do they compare with respect to organization for decision-making about environment, curriculum, instructional methods, observation, assessment, and teacher preparation? Of course, we must remember that large variations always exist in how both approaches play out in specific cases and applications. Here we can only describe their general tendencies and visions of "best practice."

History

Reggio Emilia is a city in northern Italy where a volunteer group of educators, parents, and children came together after World War II with a shared vision for how to reconstruct society through a new kind of education for young children. After the suffering and destruction of the war, they wanted to offer hope to society and improve life for children and families. Under the leadership of the founding director, Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), the system then evolved from a

parent cooperative movement into a city-run system of first preschools and then also infant-toddler centers. Malaguzzi was a social constructivist, influenced by classical progressive educators and psychologists such as Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Montessori, and by contemporary psychologists including Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, and Gardner. The system exercises a leadership role in educational innovation in Italy and Europe, and now increasingly in Asia, Australia, and other parts of the world (New, 1993).

Through their experience in the Reggio Emilia preschools, children learn to engage in dialogues and debates with others in a nonviolent and constructive manner and develop problem-solving skills. Children (and families) are also encouraged to express and discuss ideas in open democratic meetings and to form close, longterm relationships with others in the school. The schools are publicly funded and inclusive, giving first priority to children with disabilities or social service needs (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Gandini & Edwards, 2001). Reggio Emilia is not a formal model like Montessori education, with defined methods, teacher certification standards, and accreditation processes. Instead, educators in Reggio Emilia speak of their evolving "experience" and see themselves as a provocation and reference point, a way of engaging in dialogue starting from a strong and rich vision of the child (Katz & Cesarone, 1994; New, 2000).

Reggio Children/USA is the North American arm of Reggio Children S.r.l., the Italian organization set up in 1994 to protect and enrich the educational theory and practice accumulated in the Reggio Emilia municipal infant/toddler and preschool centers. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education maintains an extensive website with a Reggio link presenting information about Reggio Children/USA and a list of self-nominated schools in North America with programs based on or inspired by the approach used in Reggio Emilia. The Merrill-Palmer Institute of Wayne State University publishes the periodical *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange* and provides current study tour, conference, and contact information.

Maria Montessori preceded Malaguzzi by about half a century. A brilliant figure who was Italy's first woman physician, she reflected a late- 19th-century vision of mental development and theoretical kinship with the great European progressive educational philosophers, such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Seguin, and hard. She was convinced that children's natural intelligence involved three aspects from the very start: rational, empirical, and spiritual. After innovating a methodology for working with children with disabilities, she started her Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) in 1907 for children aged 4-7 in a housing project in the poor slums of Rome. Her movement spread to other countries, especially once the Fascist regime denounced her methods and she left Italy. In the United States, there was strong but brief interest from 1910 to 1920; but then Montessori education fell out of favor (Torrence & Chattin-- McNichols, 2000). During that time, however, the movement flourished in Europe and India. In the 1950s, an American educator, Nancy Rambush, led a movement of renewal and Montessori education spread as an independent school movement (Loeffler, 1992).