

Voluntarism and public service

Learning from the world's best pre-schools

By Brendan Martin

One crisp autumn day towards the end of the last century, an important fax message sped from the elegant northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia to Washington, D.C.. It can be imagined jostling high above the Atlantic with missives about the latest negotiations in the Balkans, then at war. This message, though, bore a simpler and more peaceful message. It announced the distance across the floor of La Villetta pre-school in Reggio, and it invited the children in the recipient nursery in the United States capital to calculate the dimensions of their institution using the same unit of measurement, toddler steps.

To follow those small feet into one of Reggio Emilia's nurseries is to enter a wonderland. That, at any rate, is how the children who are fortunate enough to spend their days there seem to feel about it. Their calm but zestful engagement in a range of creative activities certainly left that impression on this parent. So did the beauty of the carefully designed spaces in which those activities were taking place. As I left La Villetta, I found myself musing about the chances of magically becoming a Reggio citizen, turning back the clock a few years and giving my own daughters such a great early experience of public service at its best. Perhaps a time machine and a couple of other fantastic inventions would do the trick?

Speculate along those lines among Reggio's children and the chances are they would set about inventing the necessary equipment. Some of their earlier inventions -- such as an 'amusement park for birds', built in La Villetta's garden -- have worked pretty well. If other more ambitious ideas fail to progress beyond the drawing board, the children have learned from their collective attempt and, with the assistance of their teachers, are able to work out why they won't work in practice. Anyway, as the original design for the birds' amusement park shows, the children's production of imaginative designs has value in itself. Beauty and creativity are at the heart of their everyday experience of public service.

What mix of state commitment and voluntary effort produces the best public service outcomes?

That question is never far from the lips of social policy makers, especially when money is tight.

This article is based on research carried out in 1996, but we make no apology for re-publishing it without update, because the long history of Reggio Emilia's pre-schools continue to provide some of the world's richest experience.

What has this do with public service reform at the beginning of the 21st Century? After all, Reggio's child care services have been growing their deserved reputation for so long that the mothers whose political campaigns and practical work got them started are now grandmothers, and many of the children who were their earliest beneficiaries have by now put their own children through them.

The answer lies precisely in that long process of growth. Innovation has been not an intermittent slogan shouted in response to crisis, but a continuous reality, built upon a firm base that has maintained stability as the foundation for change. Theory and practice have continually enriched each other through participatory processes linking all the people concerned.

An innovative model praised worldwide

Reggio's pre-school services continue to improve, partly because they are adequately funded but also because their approach enables them to build upon their strengths to adapt to changing economic, social and cultural trends. Neither the city nor central government has imposed one failed shake-up after another on its child care workers and users, as some allegedly radical governments insist upon doing in the name of public service reform. Reggio services have been built on the basis of continually developing relationships between the local state and citizens, between management and employees, between professionals and other workers, between the staff, children and parents, and between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Rooted in shared vision and values, it is these relationships that provide the strength of the services, and the strength of the relationships is in the framework of ethics and standards they sustain and develop. Cutting edge child development theory continually informs and is informed by everyday practice. Through shared experience and systematic training, pedagogical and other child care specialists link their professional expertise with the work of practitioners in mutually enriching and supportive ways. The services are excellent because the participatory processes through which they have been developed over three decades find expression too in every moment of their delivery.

In short, Reggio has achieved just what modern public service reform is supposed to be aimed at: efficient, affordable and responsive services of high quality, provided through well-motivated and continually innovating workforces, securely rooted in -- and, therefore, all the more responsive to -- local communities. Underpinned by democratic accountability, Reggio's route to excellence provides an object lesson and challenge to the market-based orthodoxies of the international technocracy driving public service reform worldwide.

Reggio's child care institutions remain world class today by sustaining their roots through innovation, rather than ripping up those roots as so many examples of apparently radical but actually unsustainable reform have done. There are many things wrong with many public services all over the world, but

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attempts to remedy those deficiencies have often torn the basis out of institutions -- especially through privatization -- only to leave them with more problems than before.

Situated near Bologna in the region of Emilia-Romagna in Italy's north-east, Reggio has 19 municipally managed schools for infants and toddlers under three years of age, and another 13 for pre-school children aged three to six. Serving a total city population of 130,000, this is a high quantity of service by international standards, but it is quality that really defines Reggio's success. In an age when the private sector is so often said to hold the remedies for inefficiency, low quality and sterility in public services, here is a case of continuous innovation producing truly world class services.

In 1991, Newsweek magazine, having assembled an international jury of child development specialists, declared a Reggio pre-school the 'most avant-garde early childhood institution in the world'. As a result, it is not just electronic messages that whiz across the oceans to Reggio's pre-school centres. Not long after my visit, the service received its 600th delegation from other municipalities, national governments and other agencies keen to learn about its approach, and that has led to the sincerest form of flattery in a growing number of countries

It is quite something to be awarded an 'avant-garde' title some two decades after coming into existence. That is proof not only that Reggio has not rested on its mounting pile of laurels, but also that innovation can be and often is born of stability. Since the Newsweek award, there have been further international prizes and an explosion of interest which prompted the municipality to establish a company called Reggio Children to lighten the burden of dealing with enquiries and requests for help, and to promote its methods internationally.

Community activism linked to pedagogical theory

The Reggio Approach, as it has come to be known, has attracted increasing attention across Europe, and the European Union has spread the word with a promotional video. Evidently the EU's support is heartfelt -- it commissioned Reggio Children to provide pedagogical consultancy for the management of the early childhood centre in Brussels providing day care to EU staff. It has also spread as far east as Thailand and west to the Americas.

Hence the link between La Villetta and the Model Early Learning Center in Washington, D.C., now reinforced by the children's own transatlantic connection. The Washington nursery had benefited earlier from the fact that Reggio has evolved from receiving awards to handing them out. The Model Early Learning Center was the first child care institution outside Italy to receive certification for practising the Reggio Approach. Since then, nurseries and pre-schools in other parts of the United States -- California, Indiana, Missouri and Ohio -- have followed the example.

The pedagogical theory behind the Reggio Approach is based on the work of Bruno Ciari and Loris Malaguzzi, but it took the determined action of a group of working class women to give it a chance to develop in practice. It also required

the radical transformation of municipal governance in their region of Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As one of the early pioneers, a founder of La Villetta still involved in its management when I visited, recalled:

'It was based on a large-scale popular movement. A lot of workers lived in this neighbourhood and women needed a service for their children. The local administration had no money to develop facilities, so the women got organised and decided to find a place to develop the school. This Liberty-style villa (now housing La Villetta) was disused. I wanted an excuse to visit such a villa! Once I was in, I took the keys for good and I have never given them back!

'The women raised money for equipment and organised three coachloads to go to the Italian parliament. After six months we had our centre for pre-school children. Some of those women are now grandmothers but they are still on the council of the school.

'To understand how the service has developed, it is very important to remember these historical roots, because the schools were the outcome of an alliance between the community and advocates of a pioneering pedagogical approach. Families wanted not just a social service but an educational service¹.

Although community action originally drove the creation of Reggio's childcare services, what made the vision of their founders a sustainable reality was their success in securing public finance and municipal policy commitment. The partnership thus created has nourished, and been nourished by, the ethical framework within which the services have developed. Centred on commitment to children's rights -- an innovative concept in itself a generation ago -- it has been strengthened through the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders.

Elsewhere, user consultation is often little more than a cosmetic exercise to create an illusion of 'ownership', sometimes with the cynical purpose of reinforcing the pre-determined decisions of the powerful. User involvement is often, in reality, user management, driven by public relations rather than public service. In Reggio, by contrast, it means really widening and deepening democratic processes.

Likewise, much more than lip service is paid to women's rights. The presence of strong women leaders among community organisations, political parties and local public administration, and the nature of their collaboration, provide one of many important lessons Reggio holds for today's public service reformers.

La Villetta was founded in 1969, part of the first generation of Reggio's pre-schools which were followed in the 1970s by the infant-toddler centres for younger children. Local political conditions at the time were an important factor in enabling them to develop rapidly following the mothers' movement's initiative. A ruling alliance of Communists and Socialists, influenced by changing ideas about the role of the state and its relationship with society then being explored on the Italian left in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czech Republic, shared a commitment to forging stronger bonds between local government and civil society. Their vision gave rise to such innovatory organisational forms as Bologna's municipal and neighbourhood committees, factory councils and school councils. 'These form one of the essential elements for the ordering of

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the "new state", the point of connection between direct democracy and representative democracy,' as one group of observers put it in 1976, adding:

'Bologna's significance rests in the fact that its achievements have not been the results of the technocratic-Fabian decisions from the top, but of a framework of local democracy which has involved wider and wider strata of the population. ... In this network of frequent consultation, of debates, of dialogue among differing political forces -- some of which have been and are opposed to socialism -- a learning process has been underway wherein solutions to problems of the present have been reached in a participatory climate.²

The results drew praise from outside the socialist movement too. In addition to its award to Reggio's pre-schools, Newsweek described Bologna unequivocally as 'by far the best governed' city in Europe, while the New York Times praised its administration as 'efficient, democratic and relatively uncorrupt', the latter back-handed compliment not one routinely paid to Italian governance.

The mutually reinforcing association of social participation, professional specialism and public administration has found expression not only at the political level but also in the way in which Reggio's child care services are run day to day. Parents, other community representatives (typically parents whose children have earlier been at the centres) and pedagogical specialists employed by the municipality all contribute to governance.

The service's staff are also management committee members *ex officio*, and their contractual hours of work allow for attendance at committee meetings. In practice, they delegate three or four of their number to go to each meeting, so that, while all staff have regular opportunities to attend, they do not dominate the committees. In addition, the whole staff, including auxiliary workers, take part in ad hoc meetings (at which a visiting pedagogical specialist is also present) to plan projects in each age group sector and for the institution as a whole. 'There is a strong sense of belonging -- you see yourself as building something for your own use,' one teacher told me.

Setting the standard -- locally and globally

Reggio Children set up a travelling exhibition, which has toured the world, and the accompanying catalogue, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, claims: 'The municipal early childhood educational system of Reggio Emilia has always been characterised by progressive thinking and a firmly rooted commitment to research and experimentation, sustained by ongoing and permanent staff training.'

We have become so accustomed to claims of that kind being made without foundation that by now they are inclined to induce a weary cynicism, but you will have trouble finding someone in the know who would dispute that Reggio's services live up to them. Moreover, with even Reggio's relatively well-endowed municipal resources unable to stretch to providing pre-school care for every child, the services have set a standard too for other local providers.

Although high by international standards, the overall capacity of Reggio's municipal infant-toddler and pre-school centres can still provide for only around a third of the children of their age groups. But they are supplemented by two centres run by co-operatives and one by families, both in conjunction with the municipality. In addition, nearly as many of the city's children as attend the municipality's own pre-schools are accommodated by the institutions of lower quality run by the national Ministry of Education, the so-called 'state' nurseries. Around as many again go to private, mainly Catholic, pre-school centres. Between them, they cater for pretty much the entire Reggio pre-school population of around 2,700 under-threes and 3,100 aged between three and six years.

The Reggio Approach has set a standard for them all, and the municipality's most recent innovations – the development of new forms of partnership between the administration and the private and voluntary sectors -- are aimed at extending its standards to them all. The aim is to reach beyond the limits of direct municipal provision to enable the Reggio child care ethos to find expression in the staff and child development of all the city's nurseries.

An important aspect of Reggio's commitment to user and community involvement is that, in addition to paying fees and participating on management committees, parents contribute in various other ways, as do local businesses. The centres rely on parents and children thinking about and bringing in many of the materials with which the children work, for example. More than half of the materials are recycled items such as olive jars from the children's own homes, and when I visited there were plans to ask local businesses to think about what they throw away that could have an extended life and new uses in the nurseries. It represents a charming as well as practical approach to recycling.

Another manifestation of the collegiality that characterises relationships between staff and service users is that the children take it in turns to help in the production of lunch each day, working safely under the supervision of a cook whose role knows no boundary between the educational and the nutritional.

Clearly, these children and their parents are not 'consumers' of a service, much less its 'customers'. They have much more power over the deployment of state resources than either of those terms imply. They are participants in the daily recreation of the services they use, but their voluntary efforts complement those of paid staff rather than substituting for them as so many 'user involvement' projects do. The state here is indeed a facilitator, but not in the sense of abandoning its own responsibilities, but rather of acquitting them more effectively.

Another essential characteristic of the Reggio Approach is that investment in staff development is taken as seriously as investment in child development, for the simple reason that their success is mutually interdependent. As with so much else in Reggio, this might appear to be obvious, but when you consider the extent to which child care services internationally are based on cheap, unskilled, transitory labour, rather than providing for career development, you realise that even to do the obviously right thing would be revolutionary in many countries.

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Reggio's continuing commitment to innovation is rooted in 'a number of constants', as the city's Department of Education puts it, highlighting features such as team teaching and collegiality in planning and discussion; constant theoretical updating of staff; and a commitment to research and experimentation. Those principles find expression among the children through the important role of the atelier (workshop for experience-based learning), where children can develop skills in a range of arts and crafts, working both individually and collaboratively, both with and without teachers.

Reggio describes its approach as 'an educational project whose objective is to reanimate and integrate all the expressive, communicative, and cognitive languages, to educate a "re-integrated" child who constructs his or her own powers of thought and choice³. That can happen because staff have been able to develop themselves in the same spirit. Staff involvement in both planning and everyday decisions is seen as a key to the quality of those decisions, as well as a way of cementing their loyalty and commitment to the job.

The relationship between job satisfaction and service quality was well expressed by one worker I met who said she could switch to one of the 'state nurseries' and put in the same hours for no less pay. 'But I prefer to work in a quality environment -- it's more demanding,' she commented.

Partnerships to develop services

A challenging aspect of Reggio's aim of bringing all the city's child care services up to the standard of the best is to do that while also allowing those which the city does not provide directly to retain the independence they value. Even if that were not a policy commitment of the municipality, other factors determine the need for partnership rather than take-over. Local authority budgets are under pressure, while the increasing proportion of Italian women taking up paid employment in recent years has added to demand for the service even as the birth rate has declined.

As a consequence of those factors and the currently higher quality of the municipality's own nurseries, they receive around 250 more applications for places each year than they can offer. To meet that demand directly would require a 35 per cent increase in the municipality's allocation for pre-school education, which already accounts for 11 per cent of its entire budget. One way of bridging the gap would be to drive up the fees paid by parents for their children's places in the centres -- fees which, although substantial, by no means cover the full cost. That would simultaneously raise revenue and depress demand for places, but it would also undermine the original purpose and continuing ethos of the Reggio approach, since many working families would be unable to meet higher charges.

Instead, the predicament is being tackled through further innovation in relationships between the municipality, the communities it serves and the private and voluntary sectors of childcare provision. Patrizia Ghedini, the Emilia-Romagna regional officer in charge of child care services, explained: 'We are working on new forms of partnerships. We are trying to build new

relationships with civil society organisations for three reasons: firstly, because it is right in principle; secondly, because, for financial reasons, the public sector cannot meet all needs; and, thirdly, and specifically in relation to child care services, because there is already shared responsibility between the public and private not-for-profit sectors, and we can build on that.'

The result is that the region and municipalities are working more closely with the private Catholic pre-school organisations, offering them a choice. They can remain entirely autonomous -- in which case they must also meet all their own costs, losing the subsidies they had previously enjoyed from the state -- or they can accept public subsidy in exchange for incorporating some key aspects of the public agenda. An important part of that agenda is that they commit themselves to accepting children with disabilities and children from non-Christian cultures, especially among recent immigrants. In some other respects, however, they will be free to maintain their own ethos. The hope is that the Reggio approach will convince through example rather than failing to convince by imposition.

Increasing quality and wages

The labour unions, who have been strongly involved in the development of Reggio's child care services from the beginning, also embrace this latest approach to links between the public and voluntary sectors. It has not always been easy for the unions to reconcile their role as advocates for parents using the services with that of representatives of the staff working in them. That dual role is expressed in their attitude to recent changes. Gabriella Gionigi, a regional officer for FP-CGIL, said:

'Trade unions welcome this form of organisation, although there is a risk that the voluntary sector becomes a mask for privatisation. However, many people in Italy are Catholic and have the right to bring up their children as Catholics. At the same time, we are a multi-cultural society and so the differences must be represented too.

'We are very concerned about low pay in the voluntary sector and about low quality. Because of the financial pressures, other municipalities were establishing agreements with the religious sector to provide services at very low prices -- low pay, low quality and few rights for the children. So we are pleased that it is now possible to increase quality and pay.

'A lot has been achieved because the region is now giving the private religious schools a lot of money to achieve central control of quality, to give children the same rights in different kinds of institution. Abiding by labour contracts is one of the conditions. Therefore, this initiative is tackling the problem of low pay and giving more protection to voluntary sector workers as well, which is also very important to us. We want higher quality services and more job satisfaction for our members.'

That is what public service workers want the world over, but many are finding that reforms supposedly aimed at increasing quality while cutting costs are undermining their job satisfaction as well as employment security -- and failing

to improve quality as a result. 'Partnership' with the private sector is so often on corporate terms, rather than on terms established through democratically accountable processes, and cutting the price rather than increasing the value of public service is frequently the result. The Reggio approach means that workers and their unions are able to collaborate enthusiastically in shaping and carrying out the changes that are now required.

According to Simona Oddo Casano, of the Italian public service union FP-CISL: 'The aim of the unions is to show you can increase efficiency in the public sector without privatisation. Bad management in the public sector has always been regarded as one reason for the budget deficit. So a change for the trades unions is to show that the public sector can preserve its special character at the same time as improving its efficiency, by negotiating and increasing the motivation of workers.'

The need for political commitment

Much will depend on the extent to which politicians, at national, regional and local level, share that commitment to change in a spirit of social partnership. In April 1996, in Rome, Italy's then newly installed education minister Giancarlo Lombardi invoked the spirit of Reggio's pioneering child development services in pledging the way ahead, with the words: 'It often happens that brilliant inventors and capable designers encounter bureaucratic obstacles and administrative inflexibility, with the result that even the best ideas are short-lived and remain strictly limited to their creators. This is not what happened in Reggio Emilia.'

Reggio's children, like the public services that nurture them, continue to move with the times. Today's La Villetta toddlers no longer send faxes. Each has her or his own email address and can exchange messages directly with young friends in Washington's Model Early Learning Center, which has also been a pioneer. The Reggio approach is now practiced in around 20 pre-schools in the United States. Perhaps, one day, that small start will be really scaled up by learning the core lesson of the Reggio experience: that not only voluntary activism and commitment but also public finance is needed to bring the benefits of innovation to all who need them.

References

1. This and all other quoted comments from individuals are based on personal interviews conducted in September 1996 in Reggio Emilia. The woman quoted in this case preferred not to be named, on the grounds that she did not want to individualise what had been a collective effort.
2. Red Bologna, by Max Jäggi, Roger Müller and Sil Schmid, English translation, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, 1977, p.27.
3. The Municipal Infant-Toddler Centres and Pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 1994, p.6

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