

THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENT AND SPACE IN THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH A GROUP-ANALYTIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

The theme of educational spaces raises a fundamental question: is the environment only one part of the educational process or is it like a neural network, going through the whole body of education? In 1916, Dewey had laid the groundwork for one of the pillars of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA): individuals seldom exist in isolation; instead, they usually interact with the objects and entities around them. Thus, the environment may be regarded as a space or a field in which networks of relationships, interconnections, and interactions between entities occur. In 1975, Foulkes defined space as a symbolic setting in which archetypes come to life, both in connection with the foundation and the dynamic matrices. As it embraces a progressive vision of education in seeking new kinds of schools for young children, Reggio Emilia is an inspirational early-years type of approach. It is not an educational model in the formal sense, with defined methods, teacher certification standards, and accreditation processes. In the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA), attention to the relatedness of spaces and environments implicitly defines the roles of pre-schools and their activities. The REA school is a group environment, based on participation and community management, collegiality and conviviality, and shared values and objectives. Creative spaces such as the atelier and the focus on the ecology of the environment are paramount to understanding the success of the REA educational approach. Group analysis and its concepts of the *transpersonal* and the *matrix* can shed new light on understanding the success of such educational approach, in terms of analyses of its historical components, but also its vision towards building a future for the young generation. The key here is the focus on REA's political nature, understood as the unconscious level that links its founder's pedagogy to its capability to interpret education as a symbolic space of collective decision making, empowerment of children, and the construction of a shared learning community.

KEYWORDS: *Reggio Emilia Approach, environment and space, education, REA's political nature*

Historical foundation of REA

In Dewey's words, the environment consists of conditions to promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being. And these conditions constitute a field where the networks of relationships, interconnections, and interactions between entities occur.

In Foulkes's words, the environment consists of a symbolic setting where archetypes come alive in connection with the cultural foundation matrix and the *here and now* of the group dynamic matrix.

In 1945, in the Italian region of Emilia, Loris Malaguzzi, a young teacher living in the area, biked to Villa Cella to see what people had been talking about: a school was being built from the rubbles of the World War, and he wanted to see the construction site for himself. Watching the citizens of the town build a school with their own hands, he had two unsettling thoughts. First, that the very idea of building a school would arise among ordinary people, such as women, labourers, workers, farmers, was quite astonishing. Second, the fact that these same people—with no money or technical assistance, without authorisation or committees, school inspectors, or party leaders—were working side by side, one brick at a time, to construct the building was equally shocking. It turned logic and prejudice, the old rules of education and culture upside down. It compelled the pedagogue to deeply rethink his theoretical framework, to reorganise the foundations of his approach to childhood, and to reestablish his educational model on the strength and drive of the community.

To build that first school, people had sold what had remained from the war—and it was a building made to last and endure. That a tank, six horses and three trucks could give rise to a children school was an extraordinary event; that it still existed was what it deserved, wrote Malaguzzi in 1998. In the following thirty years, Reggio preschools had in fact become a reality, stemming from the desire to provide children of war with an enriching environment, a space of empowerment for the community, a collective project of rebirth, and a serious investment in the future of the young generations. Reggio schools came to emphasise the art and the beauty of the classroom. Children were encouraged to pursue their own projects and to use materials from nature in their creative work.

If we apply group analysis for the purposes of understanding the values of the REA, and take into account that its foundation matrix originated in its post-war history, space and community begin to acquire an emblematic meaning that is at the very core of its educational model. Specifically, space is to be seen as a common symbolic environment in which all sub-systems of the learning community are related: children, teaching figures, societal drives and visions are profoundly interconnected

and interdependent. In the Reggio approach, a child is not a monolithic, solipsistic individual; it is trans-personally crossed by a long tradition of social activism, public engagement, participatory methods, democratic bottom-up institutions that co-exist in the same psychic and relational space. A child is an individual that bears internal groups from its conception, sharing its personal space with that of a community that supports, sustains, fosters, enhances, and makes it thrive. Since its very beginning, a child is a fundamental hub of a cultural, social and psychic networks, intrinsically conceived of and nurtured by a web of meanings that go beyond the life of the single individual and cross, both diachronically and synchronically, generations of humans within that same symbolic space.

In such a foundation matrix, space is a revolutionary nonbinary concept, where tradition and innovation coexist; where personal and social are in a continuous exchange; where nature and culture reciprocally legitimise their function and role; where internal is external and external is internal (Elias, 1991), in a profound sense of interdependence and dialogue. REA's space is therefore political, in the original meaning of *polis* (community), a shared milieu where anything and everything is meaningful for the survival and the development of the collective body, affecting all social and personal levels of the people involved.

The pillars of REA

The starting point of the Reggio approach, because of the revolutionary impact that the community's agency had on the creation of schools, is to consider all actors of the educational space as dynamic, proactive, empowered figures. This includes the children as well; in fact, children are seen as protagonists in their learning quest, they are encouraged to follow their interests, ask questions, and participate in the decisions about their learning. The first pillar of REA is a vision of the child as an active participant in their own educational journey; i.e., it is an exploration in which they do not occupy the passenger seat, but that of the co-pilot.

Secondly, there is the issue of language: children can express themselves in a myriad of ways, not just through verbal language, but also through art, movement, music, play, digitally and more. In 1981, the exhibition *If the eye leaps over the wall. Hypotheses for a pedagogy of vision* was a selection of educational projects implemented by municipal infant-toddler centres and preschools, and shown in Reggio Emilia. Together with Loris Malaguzzi, authors of these projects were children, teachers, and pedagogical co-ordinators. In 1987, the exhibition's name changed into *The hundred languages of children. A narrative of the possible*, and ended up touring all over

the world. The *One-hundred Languages* became a synonym for a new approach to childhood that spread its seeds abroad, making Malaguzzi's vision of education more famous outside Italy than in the country itself. No surprise that it could flourish in more liberal and open societies, rather than in the regions in Italy ruled by conservative elites.

Thirdly, the curriculum is not predetermined, but emerges based on the interests and questions of children. For instance, if children show interest in shadows, this can lead to a project exploring light and shadow. The Reggio curriculum is a fluid one, without prescribed outcomes. Long-term in-depth research projects, emerging from pupils' interests, constitute the primary path to learning—one of the outstanding features of Reggio that inspires, and unnerves, more conventional settings. Malaguzzi (1998) observed: “[Children’s] own timing and rhythms demand enormous respect. Children need the support of adults in order to combat the accelerating pressures and haste to make them grow up, which is not only a treacherous sign of the subversion of biological, psychological, and cultural relationships that is currently in vogue, but also a sign of deep insecurity and a loss of perspective.”

The original need and desire for beauty and grace in the environment of the after-war children meant that every REA school now includes an *atelier* (art studio), and often mini-*ateliers* (art corners), adjoining individual classrooms. An *atelierista* (professional artist) is a standard member of staff, complementing the work of teachers by helping children communicate in their own languages, expressing themselves through art, music, or shadow play, for example. The fourth pillar of REA's foundation is art, interpreted in its fluid, untamed, multifaceted dimensions, offering unlimited creative possibilities to the child that explores and experiments, to find its voice, its style, its narrative.

The Reggio approach defies traditional education in its very core: it is not a transmissive approach; it does not hold the teacher as the sole nor the primary source of knowledge and learning. “In education, there is often a problem that teachers focus on what they like to teach, and they are not focusing on what the children like learning. When you document their learning, you know where their thinking is” (Malaguzzi, 2021). Documentation serves different functions: firstly, it accompanies children in their learning by helping them review what they have achieved and especially how they have achieved it; secondly, it offers insights to the teaching staff into children's progress and helps them reflect on their own practice; and finally, documentation informs parents and the wider community of the work of the school. It is this latter function that makes this a political endeavour; schools stem from the intentions and visions of the community, and in return, they enrich the community with the insights and achievements of their children, transforming their vulnerabilities, their cognitive

loops, their creative perspectives into something that nurtures the community as a whole. Documentation is not meant to control nor to evaluate; instead, it serves to share a sense of the world that the children build (or re-build) together with the first educators (the parents) and the second educators (the teachers), in a shared journey of discovery and creation.

Every child, like every human being, is the constructor of an array of knowledges, competencies, and autonomies. The process of learning enhances participatory strategies of exchange and discussion, of exploration and discovery. One of the main founding pillars of REA is a co-constructive paradigm. The design of activities is realised through a close synergy between the organisation of daily work and educational research; by observing the way children wander in school spaces, how they reorganise what is given into what is interpreted, how they formulate questions about the world, and how they find enlightening answers to the many *whys* of their experience, the teaching staff formulates hypotheses. These become research questions on how and what children think and know and learn. Eventually, materials and tools are offered to test those hypotheses—to allow those research questions to unfold in the *here and now* of an experience which is jointly co-built. Children are offered the opportunity to play, build, enjoy test their hypotheses, unveil wonders of physics and biology, engage in philosophical matters, raise new questions. And in the making of this process, teachers observe, learn, and start formulating new hypotheses, continuing the co-constructive circle.

The last pillar of REA is the importance of the environment, seen as the third educator. The interior and exterior spaces of infant-toddler centres and preschools are designed and organised in interconnected forms, and are presented to children and adults as places where they can live together, explore and investigate. The environment interacts, modifies, and is shaped in relation to the educational projects and the learning experiences, in a constant dialogue between architecture and pedagogy.

The dynamic matrix and its spaces

When we talk about a *group matrix*, we refer to the interconnections among three different domains. Firstly, the intra-psychic: there are tensions and forces that inhabit humans at an individual level, and these constitute the result of identificatory processes that introject into this level groups of values, affects, experiences, beliefs, relations. At this level, a child is a composite entity made of family, traditions, languages, attachments, dreams and expectations that can only partly be called its own; they are mostly inherited, transmitted, introjected, learned.

The second domain is the inter-personal. It is the space in which the individual meets the *Other*: the internal groups of the former need to continuously negotiate with those of the latter, in a complex system of interactions and connections. It is not an individual versus other individuals; it is a rich network of connections among the many internal worlds that inhabit the individual and link it to the wider community system, and the many groups that the *Other* represents, resides in, carries within, and transforms, as it goes in life. It is the horizontal dimension of the encounter between the person and its environment, made of other individuals, of contexts, but especially of the forces that drive them close or pull them apart (Lewin, 1951).

The third domain is the transpersonal—it is internalised and unconscious; it is not intentional, but it orients and guides behaviours and attitudes. It can transform with time and generations. The transpersonal is the core of the group matrix, for it runs through the person, and goes beyond the individual; it is the essence of the inevitability of its connection to all other beings, people and culture. It connects all matrices, the personal, the fundamental and the dynamic. Unlike all other animals, humans cannot survive outside of their anthropological contexts as they are not genetically designed to survive without culture and society (e.g., they are even unable to stand or crawl in order to reach the nipple and suck the essential nourishment). Human nature is cultural, it is groupal, it is transpersonal.

The dynamic matrix of a group intertwines these three domains, the intra-psychic, the inter-personal and the transpersonal, through different levels of communications. From the most visible levels of public discourse and conversations, it moves into less evident transference levels, where group roles represent family roles. What we observe is the emergence of ancestral relations with parental figures and siblings, and organisations that reveal their function of reenacting the primordial relations that have shaped us from childhood into maturity. Another two levels of communication in the dynamic matrix are the projective and the primordial one: the projective unveils the dynamic of projecting parts of one's self onto other members of the group; the primordial refers to the archetypes that a group holds in its psyche, revealing a social unconscious of the group that connects the matrix to the wider network of a society (Hopper, 2023).

The application of the group-analytic matrix to the interpretation of REA is made possible by some specific features that can be found both in Malaguzzi's pedagogy and in Foulkes's model. Both, in fact, pay specific and in-depth attention to the following: the importance of early experiences in childhood; the value of exploration and self-expression; the emphasis on relations and interactions; the recognition of the unconscious; and finally, the significance of reflection and the role of the environment. This article focuses on the latter relevance of the environment, but the same analysis

can be done for each of those features.

Psychoanalysis has extensively contributed to defining what we call psychic spaces. Donald Winnicott (1951) introduced the concept of *transitional space*, an intermediate area of experience between the subjective inner world and the shared outer world. It is in this space that play, creativity and cultural experience live. The environment has a crucial role in facilitating or constraining the availability of such transitional spaces. In his attachment theory, John Bowlby (1977) referred to a place that symbolises roots, sense of stability and protection. With the concept of *safe harbor*, they introduced the idea of a space where the child makes sense of its exploratory experiences, together with the caregiver. Such space needs to be reliable, free from intrusion, and predictable: this *safe space* enables children to explore their deepest fears, anxieties, and feelings without being threatened or judged by the adults.

Group analysis sees the environment as a combination of hard and soft elements (Di Maria and Lo Verso, 2002). The *set* of a group session constitutes a visible space that includes explicit variables such as the territory, the boundaries, the characteristics, and the rules of the group situation. The *setting*, on the other hand, is the psychic organiser that includes the theoretical, technical, and personal framework of the designer of the educational space, made by her/his theories, values, emotions, etc.

In the case of REA, the *set* is made of the architectural design that informs educational environments, promoting open and flexible spaces that encourage exploration, collaboration, and creativity. REA schools reveal the importance of beauty and order, balancing aesthetic considerations with functional aspects of design, creating visually appealing spaces that inspire curiosity and engagement in young learners. Infant-toddlers centres and preschools prioritise sensory experiences, such as tactile surfaces, varied textures, and immersive environments. Moreover, their *set* incorporates natural elements in spatial designs (such as light, air, and greenery), stimulating a child's senses and promoting a holistic learning experience; *sets* emphasise the importance of nature, outdoor exploration, and hands-on experiences in a child's development. By examining the layout of REA's classrooms, communal areas, ateliers and outdoor spaces, we gain insights into how architects aim to facilitate social interactions and peer-to-peer learning. The *One Hundred-Languages* philosophy inspires a multi-modal approach to learning, encompassing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements: spaces cater to diverse learning modalities, providing environments where children can engage with information and experiences in multiple ways, creating personalised learning spaces that allow for individualised and child-centric conditions, shedding light on the importance of accommodating diverse learning styles and preferences. The REA set is inclusive, creative, flexible, and designed to foster continuity through seamless transitions between different learning zones, indoors and outdoors, technol-

ogy and nature.

When we investigate the *setting* component of the educational space, the analysis unveils all the principles of the Reggio Approach, the theoretical and technical characteristics that constitute the pillars of the method: interactions, reflection, participation, community involvement, discovery and co-construction are some of the concepts that consciously and unconsciously translate into the design that shapes the space of the schools.

The REA *set(ting)*, a combination of the two aforementioned aspects of the space, can be seen as a shared mental field that allows all participants to reflect on phenomena and experiences, to give them meaning, and to create new connections and relationships. It is a transformative space that promotes a learning-making process through what can be referred to as *erlebnis*; this term was used by Sigmund Freud to define subjective events or experiences that frequently had a significant emotional or affective component. It alludes to a very intimate, lived experience that has a profound effect on people's mental health and wellbeing. Uncovering suppressed feelings and ideas is the goal of an *erlebnis* experience in the classroom, which aims to provide insights into the social and personal unconscious of all learners (adults and children). To reach an *erlebnis* quality, school time must thrive on immersive, hands-on learning activities in the context of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984); it goes beyond theoretical knowledge and involves personal and group active participation and reflection that add richness and depth to the learning journey. In group analysis, the concept underscores the significance of personal, subjective experiences in shaping individuals' understanding of themselves and the world around them.

In such frame of reference, REA spatial settings emphasise the experiential and emotional dimensions of learning and personal development.

Spaces as transformative opportunities

The group-analytic setting is the symbolic space where both the personal matrices of all the members of the field and the dynamic matrix of the *here and now* of the class come into play. It relates to the concept of the *countertransference field* (Di Maria and Lo Verso, 2002). It unveils how historical and subjective mental universes are activated and intertwined within the group.

REA preschools are *as-if spaces*—places of simulation that could not be more real. They constitute transitional spaces for the family relations of the child, safe harbours and group attachment bases. At the projective level, they are countertransference fields (that intertwine the fantasies of the children with those of the adults)—spaces of

the transpersonal dimension of the community and the individual, where interpsychic and intrapsychic connect.

They are also *infra-spaces*, where processes matter more than outcomes. This is maybe one of the most criticised aspect of REA. The Reggio approach does not aim at curricular goals—it does not predict results. It strives in the process—the process is often the task—and in the process, the learning emerges through experience.

Finally, REA schools are *spaces-with*, where connections are made and the community is nurtured. Eventually, the school becomes a place of networking, of cross-fertilisation, of the birth of a learning community—where all participants of the educational process experience reciprocity, mutual growth, personal development, and social advancement. In REA, the space is political and the being transpersonal—based on a revolutionary foundation matrix, promoting democratic values of equity and inclusion.

To educate is a political act. It is about choosing what and how to teach; it is about replicating a traditional transmissive paradigm or, on the contrary, transforming it into one where power and status are renegotiated among all school actors. When learning is an act of authority (a choice to explore resistances, to challenge previous knowledge, to take a role in the group and be accountable for its consequences), it is also political.

“When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek only to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks.” (hooks, 1994)

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ULOGA OKOLIŠA I PROSTORA U REGGIO EMILIA PRISTUPU: GRUPNOANALITIČKA INTERPRETACIJA

Sažetak

Kroz temu obrazovnih prostora nameće nam se temeljno pitanje: je li okoliš samo jedan dio obrazovnog procesa ili je poput neuronske mreže koja prolazi kroz cijelo tijelo obrazovanja? Godine 1916. Dewey je postavio temelje za jedan od stupova pristupa Reggio Emilia (REA); pojedinci rijetko postoje u izolaciji, odnosno, u pravilu su u interakciji s objektima i entitetima oko sebe. Tako se okoliš može smatrati prostorom ili poljem u kojem se odvijaju mreže odnosa, međusobnih povezanosti i interakcija između entiteta. Godine 1975. Foulkes je definirao prostor kao simboličko okruženje u kojem arhetipovi oživljavaju, kako u vezi s temeljnim tako i s dinamičkim matricama.

Pristup Reggio Emilia, kao progresivna vizija obrazovanja u potrazi za novim vrstama škola za malu djecu, inspirativan je pristup u kontekstu ranih godina. To nije obrazovni model u formalnom smislu, s definiranim metodama, standardima za certifikaciju učitelja i akreditacijskim procesima. U pristupu Reggio Emilia (REA), pažnja prema povezivanju prostora i okoliša implicitno definira uloge predškolskih ustanova i njihovih aktivnosti.

Škola REA jest grupno okruženje, temeljeno na sudjelovanju i upravljanju zajednicom, na kolegijalnosti i zajedništvu, na zajedničkim vrijednostima i ciljevima. Kreativni prostori poput ateljea i fokus na ekologiju okoliša ključni su za razumijevanje uspjeha REA obrazovnog pristupa. Grupna analiza i njezini koncepti transpersonalnoga i matrice mogu baciti novo svjetlo na razumijevanje uspjeha takva obrazovnog pristupa, u smislu analize njegovih povijesnih komponenti, ali i njegove vizije prema izgradnji budućnosti za mlade generacije.

Ključno je fokusirati se na političku prirodu REA-e, koja se smatra nesvjesnom razinom koja povezuje pedagogiju njezina osnivača s njezinom sposobnošću da tumači obrazovanje kao simbolički prostor kolektivnog donošenja odluka, osnaživanja djece i izgradnje zajednice za zajedničko učenje.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *pristup Reggio Emilia, okoliš i prostor, obrazovanje, politički karakter REA-e*