Tímarit um uppeldi og menntun / Icelandic Journal of Education | *33*(1), 2024, 25-35
Sérrit um leikskólastarf, tileinkað dr. Guðrúnu Öldu Harðardóttur leikskólakennara
KRISTJÁN KRISTJÁNSSON | UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM, UK
https://doi.org/10.24270/tuuom.2024.33.2

# MALAGUZZI, ARISTOTLE AND DEWEY ON THE TASKS OF EARLY-YEARS MORAL EDUCATION

Paying homage to one of Dr. Guðrún Alda Harðardóttir's academic gurus, Loris Malaguzzi, this chapter compares and contrasts the views of Malaguzzi on early-years moral education with those of two of his own academic influencers, Aristotle and John Dewey. Regarding education at the preschool level, all three thinkers turn out to have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to this particular topic and developmental level. It is suggested that the key to drawing serviceable lessons from those disparate authors may lie in aspiring to some sort of synthesis of their views, which retains the strengths but ameliorates the weaknesses. More precisely, Malaguzzi is shown to be strong on two components that Aristotle and Dewey are weak on, respectively: moral-education methodology and moral motivation.

Keywords: Malaguzzi, Aristotle, Dewey, early-years moral education, synthesis

## INTRODUCTION

It was an honour and privilege to work with Dr. Guðrún Alda Harðardóttir on setting up a branch of preschool studies – the first in Iceland at the university level – in the Department of Education at the University of Akureyri and to have an opportunity to teach the entrants to that programme for a few precious years. It is equally an honour to have been invited to contribute to this *Special Issue* to celebrate her contribution to preschool education in Iceland and the education of preschool teachers. After revisiting her doctoral thesis (Harðardóttir, 2014), which I had the privilege to co-supervise, I decided to pay homage in this short article to one of the academic gurus to which her thesis is most indebted, Loris Malaguzzi, the father of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, in order to juxtapose his views on early-years moral education with that of two thinkers to which he, in turn, was indebted: Aristotle and John Dewey (see Hoyuelos, 2013, pp. 43–44).

I do not pretend to be an expert on Malaguzzi or have first-hand knowledge of all his wide-ranging writings. However, I draw in this chapter on Alfredo Hoyuelos's (2013) extensive analysis of Malaguzzi's theorising, which also contains substantial references to primary sources. For reasons of space, I also try to limit textual references to Aristotle's and Dewey's numerous works, relying rather on my earlier overviews: Kristjánsson (2010)

for Dewey and Kristjánsson (2015) for Aristotle. However, I reference primary sources when those are not cited in those overview works.

I chose to focus on overlaps and contrasts among the three thinkers in the field of early-years *moral* education specifically, firstly, because there is a heated academic debate about that topic to which all three authors can be seen to contribute productively and, secondly and more selfishly, because that is where my own interest and expertise lies. However, a caveat is in order at the outset about this choice of topic. Aristotle did not have any discrete concept of 'the moral' at his disposal in ancient Greek, relying rather on the development of what we could call general 'characterological' features in a child: hence, the common terminology used nowadays of Aristotelian 'character education' (Kristjánsson, 2015). Moreover, Aristotle thought that civic (i.e., socio-political) virtues had teleological priority over characterological ones during a person's whole lifespan, meaning that they had priority in the order of ultimate aims as distinct from a person's developmental trajectory. Dewey's famous antipathy to educational dichotomies meant that he did not distinguish clearly between what we could call 'moral' and 'social intelligence' (Kristjánsson, 2010). For Dewey, moral growth cannot be separated from a pragmatically effective – albeit reflective and critical – adaptation to the social environment. Finally, Malaguzzi certainly made no claims to be specifically a 'moral educator'. His interest was more generally in the child as a developing chooser, responsible agent and an interactive subject (Hoyuelos, 2013, pp. 81, 114). We must bear in mind, therefore, that all three authors were interested in the overall socio-moral and psycho-moral growth of children, conducive to their overall flourishing (*eudaimonia*), rather than the child understood specifically and exclusively as a 'moral agent', in the way that some later theorists (such as Kohlberg) did.

I assume that most readers of this volume have some knowledge of Malaguzzi's early-childhood philosophy – at least to the extent that it has informed the pedagogy of the Reggio Emilia schools. For those readers, it should come as no surprise that Aristotle and Dewey are mentioned among his influencers. First, both Aristotle and Dewey had a very practical approach to socio-moral upbringing, focused on *praxis* rather than *theoria*. For both, what matters is not so much to *learn about* the good as *becoming* good, and you become good primarily by being inducted into doing the good by family, caregivers and teachers. Hence, the famous Deweyan phrase of 'learning by doing' – although Dewey never used those exact words in his writings – which Aristotle would have endorsed whole-heartedly. Second, Aristotle and Dewey shared a naturalistic methodology, according to which all theorising about education needs to be answerable to empirical research. Third, Aristotle in particular and Dewey also (although to a lesser extent) focused strongly on the role of the *early years* in moral development – Aristotle to the extent of being deterministic about them, as we see later. Finally, both Aristotle and Dewey foregrounded the role of critical thinking in their developmental theorising. All these four features would naturally have been music to Malaguzzi's ears.

To make a long story short, I argue in the following that if we look more extensively at Aristotle's and Dewey's accounts of moral development (incorporating late childhood–early adulthood as well as the early years), we will find that Aristotle is strong on the

cognitive content of the moral traits developed and the motivations for pursuing moral goals. He is, however, weak on pedagogical methods. Dewey, by contrast, is strong on methods of development and teaching, but weak on cognitive content and rather simplistic on moral motivation. My guiding question, then, is whether Malaguzzi can ameliorate shortcomings in either, or both, Aristotle and Dewey and help us reach some kind of constructive synthesis of these views.

## ARISTOTLE

So much has been written about Aristotle's account of moral (characterological) development and character education of late, including by the present author (Kristjánsson, 2015), that it is difficult to summarise it without reverting to platitudes. Aristotle's fascination – some would say obsession – with early-years character education is well-known. It is 'very important, indeed all-important' to acquire the correct sort of moral habits right from our youth (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1985, 1103b). Without such education, later in life the person 'would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it [if he did listen]; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change?' (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1985, 1179b). So, indeed, without a sound education in the early years, a person can never reach eudaimonia. More specifically, while Aristotle has a Plan A for children brought up in good habits and even Plan B for children brought up in minimally decent habits, he has no Plan C for children who have no positive moral role models around them in their childhood (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022, Appendix). Even Guðrún Alda and others, who believe most firmly in the effects of early-years education, would probably agree that Aristotle goes a tad too far in his early-years determinism here (cf. Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 5).

As children grow older, they must, according to Aristotle, learn to choose the right actions from 'a firm and unchanging state' of character of right reasons and right motives and take intrinsic pleasure in them' (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1985, 1105a) – otherwise those have no moral worth. So if the person does not develop the meta-virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which revisits critically, reinforces and integrates the already-inculcated moral traits, all the education process has been wasted, at least from a moral point of view. The person may still act in prosocial ways, but just like a puppet or an automaton, without her actions having any independent moral worth. In other words, if the motivation is not autonomous, the person neither bears ultimate responsibility for it nor can be expected to do the right thing when countering novel and complex situations.

Most of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is about the cognitive content of the traits of character that a well-brought up child develops, following the architectonic of the 'golden mean' where the cognitive content of the virtue of courage lies, for example, in a medial state between cowardice and foolhardiness. Early-years moral education is described mostly as a process of sensitisation to the proper emotions. This emotional development provides the catalysts or motivations for making morally commendable decisions, which persist into adulthood if all goes well. This, in short, is why I said above that Aristotle is strong on the content of, and motivations behind, the positive character traits that he called 'virtues'.

On the other hand, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is fairly short on details regarding teaching methods or even more general pedagogies. It is clear that in the early years, habituation (learning to become just, for example, by being steered to copy just acts, precisely as you learn to play the flute by imitation) plays a crucial role, as does the *emulation* of worthy role models. However, those methods are not described in any detail. Things get even murkier when it comes to the transition – probably in late adolescence – from habituated virtues to *phronesis*-overseen-and-infused virtues (Darnell et al., 2019). A paradox even seems to be lurking here; how can a child who has received only heteronomously guided training develop an autonomous motivation to be good on her own reflective and critical terms? As the famous educational philosopher Richard Peters (1981) asked: Is heteronomously formed autonomy even psychologically possible, let alone morally justifiable?

Returning to Aristotelian early-years moral education, Nancy Sherman (1989) has argued that the standard interpretation of Aristotle cannot be right because it is simply too psychologically and educationally implausible. He must have meant that the habituation process in the early years already taps into and gradually nurtures children's critical and rational capacities; we cannot wait for that until the child reaches adolescence. If that is the case, however, the role of the early-years tutor (be it a family caregiver or a preschool teacher) becomes even more crucial because the tutor is now not only an object of uncritical imitation but someone who stimulates critical thinking in the child, ideally in systematic and intentional ways. At the same time, the tutor must make sure that the child does not become attached to her simply as a role model to copy uncritically but rather as a source of reflective thinking. In modern contexts, this elevates the salience of the preschool teacher to even greater heights – the kind of heights that I know Guðrún Alda has always aspired to herself, by the way. Not only this, but it also highlights the importance of dialogic methods already at the preschool level, as Guðrún Alda has always emphasised (Harðardóttir, 2014).

The fairly negative tone in this section must not be seen as a repudiation of Aristotle's basic insights about character education. There are reasons why the present author and many others have tried to revive those insights for present-day consumption. However, what is being revived is typically a form of *neo-Aristotelianism*, which has been complemented and updated in many ways by contemporary social science (Kristjánsson, 2015). The historical Aristotle, which Malaguzzi will have been familiar with, left many lacunae in his writings about how to bring up the socio-morally intelligent child towards becoming a phronimos, a person of full virtue.

## DEWEY

While sharing many of Aristotle's practical intuitions, Dewey's views were the product of a very different historical era, and he was a much less systematic and consistent thinker than Aristotle. Over an enormously long career, dating back to the 19th century and lasting into the 1950s, Dewey left a mountain of writings about developmental issues, including those concerning the early years, as well as about almost any other psychological, philosophical or educational issue one can think of. The problem is that Dewey changed his

mind regularly and never aspired to create a consistent body of theory. In a short paper, there is no alternative other than being highly selective. I will focus, as a case in point, on his 1939 essay on *creative democracy*, both because it shows how creative and an outside-of-the box-thinker he was and also because it elicits both some of the strengths and weaknesses of Dewey's approach.

Before turning to this particular essay, it is worth recalling that Dewey did not conceive of morality as an autonomous domain but rather understood it simply as a set of naturalistic solutions to co-ordination problems in human societies. He equated moral expertise with social intelligence, therefore, and understood moral philosophy as a branch of experimental science: of learning what works morally by testing it psychologically and socially (see further in Kristjánsson, 2010). In the same vein as he socialised morality, Dewey also moralised (or we could even say 'characterologicalised') social constructs. For example, Dewey did not understand democracy first and foremost as a form of government but rather as a personal way of life that needs to be cultivated in the home and the early-years classroom to become ingrained in the individual. One might say that Dewey argues for democratic 'virtues', even if he does not use that term – and describing his ideas in that way brings him close to Aristotle. Only subsequently to the process by which democracy becomes a personal way of life can it acquire any clear constitutional or political sense. This view is so radical and innovative – or some might say idiosyncratic – that it is worth unpacking it in some detail with direct quotes from Dewey:

> Democracy as a personal, an individual, way of life involves nothing fundamentally new. But when applied it puts a new practical meaning in old ideas. Put into effect it signifies that powerful present enemies of democracy can be successfully met only by the creation of personal attitudes in individual human beings; that we must get over our tendency to think that its defense can be found in any external means whatever…if they are separated from individual attitudes so deep-seated as to constitute personal character (Dewey, 1939).

What needs to be inculcated in the young, therefore, is a belief in 'the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other' (Dewey, 1939). The most powerful expression of this moralised-cum-psychologicalised way of thinking about democracy is enshrined in the following passage:

> [We need to] realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes (Dewey, 1939).

This radical view has various educational implications. First, if democracy is primarily a virtue of individuals (upon which democracy as a social institution supervenes), then we need to instil the democratic frame of mind in early-years education, geared towards the individual's characterological development. Second, the democratic frame of mind must

be built upon critical thinking, experimental method, discussion, reflection and critical friendship (Kristjánsson, 2022) – and can only be nourished indirectly by openly cultivating those intellectual virtues. Third, the only way to cultivate those virtues is by letting students act them out – learning them by doing them. We need to change playschool classrooms into democratic labs! Fourth, citizenship/civic education that only teaches pupils about citizenship is as useless as teaching children computing by reading about the history and value of computers. They need to learn to use them in their real lives; and this is why all classrooms, even in playschools, need to become democratic communities.

Dewey's works provide a clear pedagogical methodology for trying out those implications: namely, hypothesis-testing in the classroom. His teaching methods are derived from his general pragmatic epistemology and scientific methodology (Kristjánsson, 2010), and whether or not one agrees with those assumptions, it would be churlish to argue that Dewey is weak on methods of moral education. He is much weaker on motivation and content, however. Dewey was, like Kohlberg (1981), a motivational internalist who believed that those who know the value of something (say, critical thinking or democracy) will automatically be motivated to seek it. Subsequent findings – which led to the fall of the Kohlbergian internalist-rationalist paradigm in moral education in the 1990s – have indicated, however, that reason and knowledge alone are only weakly correlated with actual behaviour (Blasi, 1980). Moreover, Dewey is weak on the content of, for example, the democratic frame of mind. It is not entirely clear what the democratic agent judges in the end to be good and true apart from her own method of critical inquiry. 'Democracy' is, therefore, in Dewey's account a proceduralist rather than a substantive concept (although later theorists have added substantive content to his concept, see e.g. Jónsson & Rodriguez, 2021). Since there is no ontologically realist truth to aim at – according to Dewey's pragmatism – there do not seem to be any substantive constraints on where our 'democratic frame of mind' may lead us.

A Deweyan might point out, however, that the democratic frame of mind will rule out some reactions as inappropriate, even if only pragmatically/procedurally so, for example reverting to violence in adjudicating the question or exhibiting differential treatment in taking account of arguments from different parties to the debate. Dewey's proceduralism cannot be considered fully amoral, therefore. Yet the lack of an explicit substantive content will make life very difficult, for example, for a preschool teacher who gets asked by a child why it is morally good to exhibit gratitude by saying 'thank you' or compassion by comforting a crying peer. While Dewey might say that gratitude and compassion are ways to build friendship, with friendship being a precondition for constructive learning and democratic life, there does not seem to be any non-instrumentalist answer to such questions at hand except after forming a community of inquiry in the classroom and facilitating a critical inquiry about them – wherever that may eventually lead the teacher and the children. Notably, similar misgivings have often been expressed about the method of philosophy-with-children, which also has some Deweyan roots, although it is more often labelled 'Socratic'.

## MALAGUZZI

The discussion has elicited some strengths and weaknesses in the accounts canvassed, even before Malaguzzi has been invited to the party. The scorecard now roughly looks like this:

**Table 1**
*Aristotle and Dewey Compared*

| | Aristotle | Dewey | Malaguzzi |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Content** | Strong | Weak | ? |
| **Motivation** | Strong | Weak | ? |
| **Method** | Weak | Strong | ? |

The question which beckons now is where Malaguzzi would fit into this table. There is no doubt about his high standing with respect to questions of pedagogical methods. Most of his writings are in one way or another related to the question of how to make children active participants in the learning process: namely, finding appropriate methods in preschool classrooms to give back to children 'the capacities that have traditionally been stolen from them' by overbearing, paternalistic educators (Houyelos, 2013, p. 70). Anyone who knows anything about the Reggio Emilia philosophy knows how instrumental Malaguzzi was in devising methods to help children become masters of their own life choices. 'Small' as some of those choices may seem in the grand scheme of things, they nevertheless lay the foundations for autonomy regarding 'bigger' choices later in life. It is no wonder that Howard Gardner called Malaguzzi 'Reggio's genius guide'; for on methods to achieve his aims, Malaguzzi is second to none. One could even argue that he is much more specific in his pedagogical advice than Dewey who often relied on fairly generic references to 'discovery learning'. The ideal of the child as a *chooser in the making* lies at the very heart of Malaguzzi's methodology (cf. also Harðardóttir, 2014), in a way that is reminiscent of Montessori.

One might also argue that Malaguzzi is more specific than Dewey about how his classroom methods activate *meaning-making* in the child. Although both were essentially 20th century thinkers, Malaguzzi was born much later than Dewey and seems to have been better attuned to the cognitive-science revolution in psychology that happened after the middle of the century. Thus, one also finds hints of Bruner in Malaguzzi, in addition to Dewey; philosophers might even suspect a Wittgensteinian influence, although that is probably merely wishful thinking. Once again, we must bear in mind, however, that Malaguzzi was concerned with the general cultivation of the child as a *responsible agent* in the world – encompassing personal, civic, environmental and political tasks – rather than with the development of 'the moral child' more restrictively construed. In that sense, Malaguzzi's conception of a child's 'growth' is closer to that of Dewey than that of many moral psychologists who have concentrated more squarely on the growth of the child as a moral agent (see e.g. Damon, 1990).

While Aristotle received a high score above on the motivation component of moral education, a paradox lurks at the core of his developmental theory: namely, of how to bridge the gap between heteronomous early-years formation and critical, reflective *phronesis*-development later on (Peters, 1981). Although Malaguzzi was probably not familiar with these problematics, he comes close to offering a solution to the paradox. He even referred explicitly to a potential 'gap in the Reggianan pedagogy' that would need to be mended (Houyelos, 2013, p. 271). Anticipating a moral-identity-formation solution to the paradox that some psychologists have suggested later (Darnell et al., 2019), Malaguzzi thinks that children need to learn from an early age to become 'protagonists' of their own lives (Houyelos, 2013, p. 334). One of the fundamental goals of early-years education is thus to provide children with opportunities to create their own identity, voice and meaning, without forcing it upon them heteronomously (2013, p. 63). Rather than insisting on a strict developmental heteronomy–autonomy distinction, Malaguzzi suggested that the subjectivities of the adult and the child needed to be combined in the right way (2013, p. 68) from the outset, issuing in a pedagogy of dialectic co-operation (2013, p. 101).

Malaguzzi probably did not have Aristotle in mind explicitly, but he obliquely takes a stab at his account of the emulation of moral exemplars (and possibly at Montessori also) when he warns against the creation of too strong an emotional bonding between the preschool teacher and the child. The adult teacher needs to project the image, not of an all-knowing guru, but of a 'vulnerable and humble person' (2013, p. 265) – and of the bearer of controversial, corrigible truths that the child needs to learn to question. This is a demanding role that it will not be easy to fulfil: namely, as a teacher, exposing one's subjectivity to the children as just one unique frame of mind that is not necessarily 'correct' (2013, p. 272). The trick here is to offer sufficient intellectual and moral support and encouragement to the child, without creating the image of an invincible, omniscient role model. Notably, there is a lively current debate in psychological, educational and philosophical circles nowadays about the nature of role-modelling and the advantages of role models being relatable and attainable rather than too 'perfect' (see e.g. Han et al., 2017).

As we have seen already, then, it would be unfair not to rate Malaguzzi highly on the component of (moral) motivation and its creation. To end this overview on a slightly more negative note, however, there is no denying the fact that Malaguzzi was, like almost all 20th century social scientists, held in thrall by the unfortunate conflation, dating back to Hume but compounded by Weber (1949), of the reasonable is–ought distinction with the much less reasonable fact–value distinction. Like Weber, Malaguzzi considered moral judgements to evaluate subjectively an independent world of description rather than describing an objective world of evaluation. Regarding moral content, Malaguzzi was thus a liberal proceduralist, like Dewey, and refused to pass judgements on the content of children's evaluative frameworks, as those were deemed to be inscrutably indeterminate (Houyelos, 2013, p. 321).

I think Malaguzzi went much farther here than he needed to. He could have plausibly remained a pluralist on the cognitive content of children's evaluative frameworks – as there are uncountable 'correct' ways of perceiving the same 'mountain' and planning one's preferred routes up that 'mountain'. But some perceptions and routes are simply

inappropriate – that is, epistemologically or morally wrong – and in those cases, it is incumbent on the teacher to correct them.

It would be somewhat unfair, however, to criticise Malaguzzi for not having made those points, considering that what he was fighting in Italy at his time was a penchant for moral/political absolutism and pedagogical paternalism rather than moral relativism or subjectivism. As Aristotle reminded us, we reach the 'golden mean' in each particular instance by dragging ourselves away from the more appealing extreme – and the academic demons Malaguzzi was fighting in the latter half of the 20th century were not the same demons as he would have been fighting today.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The final scorecard in this quick-fire juxtaposition of Aristotle, Dewey and Malaguzzi then looks like this:

**Table 2**
*Aristotle, Dewey and Malaguzzi Compared*

| | **Aristotle** | **Dewey** | **Malaguzzi** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Content** | Strong | Weak | Weak |
| **Motivation** | Strong | Weak | Strong |
| **Method** | Weak | Strong | Strong |

As we can see from this Table, I consider Malaguzzi to be strong on two components that Aristotle and Dewey are weak on, respectively. What is more, Malaguzzi provides a solution to a remaining problem in one of the areas where Aristotle is still, relatively speaking, stronger than Dewey: namely, moral motivation. Malaguzzi realised, much more acutely than Dewey and even more perceptively than Aristotle, that we need a strong sense of moral identity, whose foundations are laid in early childhood, to bridge the gap between knowing the good and choosing to do the good from a reflective, critical state of mind. Kudos to Guðrún Alda for having facilitated the publication of Houyelos's (2013) book about Malaguzzi in Iceland, for otherwise we would not have a systematic, theoretical account of Malaguzzi's philosophy to draw upon.

The proverb says that great minds think alike. In academia that is definitely not true. Great minds think very differently. In some cases, aiming for a synthesis of highly different views can land us with an eclectic mixture of ill-assorted elements. In the present case, however, I do think there is sufficient synergy between some fundamental beliefs held by Aristotle, Dewey and Malaguzzi on the moral salience of early-years education to aim for a constructive synthesis. For example, Aristotelians can learn from the pedagogical methods suggested by Dewey and Malaguzzi and advocates of the latter two

can at least consider the possibility of making their views of the ideal cognitive content of moral functioning more realistic and less subjectivised. I am optimistic that Guðrún Alda herself would be sympathetic to such a synthesis. Aided by her own work with children uninfected by any academic theorising, one of the crowning glories of Harðardóttir's PhD work (2014) was, after all, to make very different theorists with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, such as Malaguzzi, Habermas and Bandura, interact constructively, and to carve out a new unified paradigm from their approaches. Crossover work of this kind can, in my view, enrich both the theory and practice of preschool education, in Iceland and elsewhere – and I hope that lesson has come across persuasively enough in this paper.

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Greinin barst tímaritinu 8. apríl 2024 og var samþykkt til birtingar 1. júlí 2024.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristján Kristjánsson (k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk) PhD in Philosophy from the University of St. Andrews, 1990, is a Professor of Character Education and Virtue Ethics, University of Birmingham and also holds a fractional position in the School of Education, University of Iceland. He works on the borderline between moral philosophy, moral psychology and moral education, and has published various works in those areas. He is the editor of *Journal of Moral Education*.