Unpacking My Questions and Images: Personal Reflections on Reggio Emilia

by Bonnie Neugebauer

I thought I was taking a trip, but I was beginning a journey. I knew I would be impressed, but I was filled with delight and wonder. I returned home, but my mind keeps traveling. When I visited the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, I expected to learn about an exemplary educational system, but I am beginning to glimpse a different way of living. These reflections guide my journey.

I thought I left home with an open mind, a supply of film, and plenty of pencils. But I wasn’t prepared. I have visited wonderful programs for young children across the United States, and I didn’t want to forget that. As we began listening and visiting, people would ask, “Isn’t this wonderful?” “Can you believe it?” “Do you get it?” I would respond with a verbal “Yes” and a mental “but. . . .”

I had carefully secured the doorstep in my mind, a secure (or so I thought) place from which to hold on to my reservations. I did not want to be blown out of my comfort zone. But as conversations and days passed, the flood of impressions and ideas not only moved the doorstep; they tore the door from its hinges.

The schools in Reggio Emilia are wonderful places for children and adults to spend their days, working and learning together. They have grown out of a culture that values children, out of the intense commitment of a group of parents, out of the leadership of a visionary man. They have a long history; they have evolved over time. These schools are rooted in the culture that created them.

It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for us to try to replicate the Reggio schools in the United States. But it would be foolish to miss or reject the opportunity to learn from them. Whether we study what they have done intensely or whether we visit Italy
briefly or attend their seminars here, or whether we read about what they are doing, each of these experiences is an opportunity to change, to look at what we are doing, and to work and live more thoughtfully.

With Children as the Focus

There is much discussion centered around the image of the child in Reggio Emilia. This image is the reference point from which all teaching and learning begin and to which they always return. There is great respect for the child as learner, sensitivity for the individual nature of learning, and support for learning in community.

This is a place where children come first. They don’t come first after budget constraints or staffing issues, or anything else. They simply, and significantly, come first. Everything centers around them and evolves through them. They are the focus of all that happens. You not only see and hear this message as you enter the schools, you feel it, even taste it. This is their place, a place that bears the stamp of their individual personalities, their learning experiences, and their own particular community at work. The presence and work of children permeates the space.

This is a place where children are powerful. This space belongs to them, they can create and recreate. It is organized for their inspiration and control. Not only do the children understand how to move through their environment, but they see everywhere a history, a record of what has already happened. What they do impacts the environment. Displays and descriptions of their work help children to figure out where they are going with their learning and where they have been; they emphasize the importance of what children are doing.

There is great attention to detail — in the environment, in display, in recording. As adults talk about the children’s learning, they never say “a boy,” or “one child.” It is always, “When Antonio…” or “Gina was talking…” Great attention is given to observing, describing, and recording with accuracy and thoroughness.

There is time to enjoy the process of learning. There is time to experiment, to make mistakes and readjustments, to laugh, and to complete a task to satisfaction. There is also time to return to a task to reexamine and experience growth.

Two boys are placing yellow and white checkered tablecloths on narrow tables for lunch. As they step back to examine their efforts, they laugh together. They straighten the cloth and look again. Still unsatisfied, they make more adjustments. Their teacher stops to watch. She directs their attention to the overhang, and suddenly they realize that placing the length of the cloth across the width of the table just doesn’t work — they all laugh. And the boys return to their task.

Nearby, other children are setting the tables with real crockery, glasses, and complete sets of cutlery. They spend over an hour setting all the tables for lunch.

Teachers seem to be on the alert for creating moments/occasions that will surprise or delight the children. There is a sense of excitement. This is a place where surprises can happen and an unplanned, unbidden event can change the course of the day: Wouldn’t it be perfect if a zebra came frolicking through the field of poppies? Should a stork appear during the celebration? Wouldn’t a potato masher make a wonderful wolf puppet as counterpart to the potato grandmother?
Behold the Child at My Side

The child is learning about him or herself, about others, about the world. The adults are engaged in learning about the children. This is their vocation, perhaps their avocation.

Adults sit at tables, hover over light tables, move as the needs of the children dictate. They are watching and listening, recording; they are engaged in learning about the learning of the children. And the children see all this. The fact that they are being observed as they work, that adults are so interested in what they are doing, that what they are doing is of such great significance that it is being recorded, all send a powerful message to these children.

And the teachers are talking with the children: “Bellisimo.” “Bene, bene!” They ask questions, seeking to understand what is happening for the child during this learning experience. They are involved with the children. They are on the child’s level, involved in the child’s task, working to understand the child’s thinking. And with photos and tapes and pens, they are preserving a record of this process for later discussion to further their own learning.

Teachers are fully engaged with the child in the process of learning. They are with the child as an idea develops, a project takes shape, a discovery unfolds. Their delight in the ah-hah of the moment of discovery is as new as that of the child. They are not in front of the child, leading the way, thinking ahead to tomorrow’s lessons. They are not following the child, frantically transcribing a history. They are not in or near or beside or next to or close to; the relationship is not parallel. The engagement is with.

The learning is not directed at solutions, formulas, answers, but at more questions, more possibilities to explore. Children are learning to think; they are supported in observing the power of their own ideas.

A Community of Learners

The children and teachers and parents develop a very real sense of community during their work together. All are invested in the process of learning.

Many of the projects and much of the artwork created at the schools in Reggio Emilia are group efforts. A large piece of work, displayed for all to enjoy, is often composed of the smaller, individual works of each child. Children contribute to the formation of the project, work individually and in groups, and share in the accomplishment of the result. Within this context the sense of community develops and the very social nature of life and work is grounded in a group identity.

Moments of discovery immediately become opportunities to share. Interactions are continual and the air hums with conversations punctuated by joyous ah-hahs!

Teachers work as a collaborative group. They share with each other during extensive planning. Each contributor is equal, each comes to the effort with a real sense of cooperation. Problems/risks/errors are all worked on together; no one struggles on alone. What evolves benefits from each person’s contribution but bears the mark of the group.

And there is a love of conflict, of looking at things from different points of view and tangling with snarly issues, of arguing, sharing, talking. Difficulties are challenges.
Parents are invited into the learning situation in a variety of ways even before the child actually begins his first day. The displays of children's art — the gallery of written and visual information in the foyer, the panels on the walls that record the children's projects and learning — all draw parents into conversations with each other and into an awareness and growing interest in the life of the school. Involvement in specific activities with the children — making furniture and providing materials, serving on committees, participating in celebrations of projects — are also ways that parents share in what is happening.

So Much Beauty

A great deal of thinking and problem-solving has gone into figuring out what comprises a wonderful learning environment for children. This is not an environment where everything matches, where everything is shiny and new — this is an environment filled with unlimited opportunities for discovery. It is an environment that is created by the learning that goes on within its spaces and the learners, both child and adult, themselves.

It is beautiful in the way that a home is beautiful. It reflects the stories of the people who live within it and it evolves through a sensitivity to natural beauty — wood, sunlight, plants, colors, comfort. It feels like a studio, with plenty of light, comfortable places to sit and work, well-organized materials, careful display of past projects, natural materials creating inspiration for future endeavors.

It appears at moments to be a magic place, full of wonder and beauty. But this environment is very complex. Great attention has been paid to details and to extending possibilities. Light is transformed by objects in its path — mobiles, transparent or translucent paintings, mirrors. It is turned into reflections and shadows and rainbows and distorted images.

And it transforms artwork, taking it to new dimensions. What does this collage look like unilluminated, with light shining upon it, with light shining through it? By moving her artwork, the child is able to change the world she sees both indoors and out.

Transparency is one of the words the educators in Reggio like to use. Spaces do not have definite boundaries; windows, short walls, dividers with open spaces, mirrors, mobiles, all carry our eye from one space to the next to the next. Just as learning is not divided and cordoned into categories — children go back to previous projects and learning to think again about these ideas. Things spiral and extend in Reggio Emilia. There is a sense of continuity and connectedness. This is an environment created by millions of questions and thoughts and ideas, carefully crafted out of an ongoing collaboration among all of the people invested here — parents, teachers, administrators, and, of course, children.

What Will I Do with All This Baggage?

There is so much that we can learn from the educators in Reggio Emilia. Some might challenge themselves to learn it all. Being less confident, or perhaps feeling less Italian, I just want to make sure that I use my images and ideas and all the upheaval they have created in my mind, starting with these resolutions:

- In every interaction with children to ask: “What am I saying about my image of this child?” (And then, of course, to reconcile this information with my preconceived images of the child.)

- To be more thoughtful about everything. Rather than looking for answers (endplaces), to focus on learning to ask good questions and doing the next thing. To take pleasure in challenges and growth. To argue and risk more, and agree less.

- To work on improving observational skills. To try to separate what I thought I would see from what I am seeing.

- To know that we, too, can create places where children are absolutely first, and to work to create and support them.

- And to keep my images fresh in my mind to inspire and motivate the best in me.

Where this new learning will take us is unknown. It's a spiral, it's ongoing — it's tremendously exciting! And it's wonderful for our children.

Bonnie Neugebauer, editor of Child Care Information Exchange, was part of the June 1993 delegation to Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Photographs in this article were taken by the author.
Not Just Anywhere: Making Child Care Centers into "Particular" Places

by Lella Gandini

When you enter a school for young children, you get an instant feeling about the children and the teachers. Their voices, their clothes, their motions all carry messages about who they are. But all too seldom does the physical environment carry these same kinds of messages. From one preschool to the next, from one child care center to another, you see similar kinds of activity centers, familiar educational materials, the same toys, and the same decorations on the walls — be it Santa Claus, Barney, or fall leaves. In other words, even though we may value individuality in children and adults, we rarely build environments which have personality.

One of the greatest challenges in designing institutions is to transform a physical plant into a human environment. One part of this transformation has to do with discovering ways to make impersonal rooms and hallways reflect the lives of the children and adults who spend so many active hours in that space. Who are they as people? What are their lives like outside of this building? What are their daily experiences? What are their homes like? What do they bring to a center from their culture? What is the history of their center or school?

In Italy there is a program, among many run by cities, where teachers and children have found a wealth of ways to make rooms, halls, and familiar activity areas reflect their personal and cultural histories. The space that surrounds them has, across a number of years, become a particular space belonging to that particular group of children and adults with a unique history and cultural background.

The program is found in the Commune of Reggio Emilia, a town of 130,000 inhabitants which sits in the fertile plain of the Po Valley, located in the northern and economically better developed part of Italy. In Reggio Emilia, there is a strong preschool program which originated in schools started by parents at the end of the Second World War. The city now runs 20
schools for children between three and six years of age and 12 infant centers for children under three; it services respectively 47% and 35% of the children of those ages.

The philosophy underlying this preschool program has evolved through the years. Part of this dynamic growth has come from a partnership between teachers, parents, and educational advisors. Among the ideas which have come from this collaboration is the educational significance of thoughtfully designed physical spaces.

Loris Malaguzzi, a leader of education for young children in Italy, talks about the importance of space in this way: “We value space because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective, and cognitive learning. All of this contributes to a sense of well-being and security in children. We also think that the space has to be a sort of aquarium which mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it.”

**A Sense of Personal Space**

The schools of Reggio are astonishing. The rooms are simply beautiful. However, their beauty does not come from expensive furnishings, rather from the message that the whole school conveys about children and teachers engaged together in the pleasure of learning. There is attention to detail everywhere: in the color of the walls, the shape of the furniture, the arrangement of the simplest objects on shelves and tables. Light from the windows and doors shines through transparent collages and weavings made by the children. Healthy, green plants are everywhere. Behind the shelves displaying shells are mirrors which reflect the patterns which children and teachers have created.

But the environment is not just beautiful — it is highly personal. For example, in one of the halls, a series of small boxes made of white cardboard creates a grid on the wall. On each box the name of a child or a teacher is printed with rubber stamp letters. These boxes are used for leaving little surprises or messages for one another. Communication is valued and favored at all levels.

Walking a little further, you see a display of pine cones placed in order by size, and next to them a series of round, polished pebbles arranged in rows by shades of color from white to dark gray. The natural beauty of these found objects, along with their form, texture, color, and size, is highlighted by the careful attention with which they have been arranged on a lighted shelf just at children’s eye level. This display, like others throughout the school, records a recent event in children’s lives. The display contains the treasures which children picked up on a special walk through the woods to the bank of the river.

Children are encouraged to bring in tokens of their home experience connected with daily or special events. They bring shells from their vacation on the seaside in the summer or they bring traditional decorations when they return from their winter vacations. Teachers collect these items and build displays where each child’s contribution is respected and at the same time becomes part of a larger picture. For example, the children’s decorations were each put in a transparent bag: the bags were all put together into a huge transparent hanging which caught the light from a nearby window. Children could simply watch the play of light on the hanging, they could play counting games with the objects, they could gather around and compare what each of them had contributed.

The space in the school of Reggio Emilia is personal in still another way: it is full of the children’s own work. Visual expression is so important in the curriculum that a teacher who has a training in art works with children throughout every school day. This teacher is called an atelierista because the main laboratory/studio where many projects are develop is called an atelier. The atelierista also works with teachers to plan projects, to carry them out, and to help them display the children’s work. The results literally surround the people in this school. Everywhere there are paintings, drawings, paper sculptures, constructions, transparent collages coloring the light, mobiles moving gently overhead. This work is not restricted to bulletin boards or hallway walls. It turns up even in unexpected spaces like stairways and bathrooms.

These works are not simply the result of exploring materials or making designs; they are a reflection of children’s immediate and personal experiences. Once, after a heavy rain, a big puddle of water formed in the school garden. The children went out to play and explore, stamping their boots and throwing pebbles in the puddle. Suddenly, one of them noticed their upside down reflections in the water.
The children became excited, and the teacher began to ask questions. An animated discussion followed about why the reflection was upside down. The children experimented with movements and gestures, looking at themselves in the puddle. Later, when they returned inside, they began to draw people and trees reflected in water. A small group made up a story about a child’s adventure in a topsy-turvy world. This event marked the beginning of a long project involving exploration of reflections in water and in mirrors.

As you walk through a school in Reggio Emilia, you often come across children clustered around a display of drawings or collages. They take pleasure in talking over their experiences, comparing details, or using their earlier projects as a point of departure for new works, experiments, or conversations. This lively record of past work surrounds the children and adults and creates a vivid documentation of their recent experiences.

A Sense for the Life of a Particular Community

When you wander to the housekeeping corner, you are in for a surprise. Against the wall there is a cupboard lined with foods — much as you might see in a child care center anywhere. But when you look closely, you see that the jars and boxes don’t contain familiar plastic fruits and vegetables. Instead, the jars contain pasta of different shapes and beans of different types and colors — exactly the kinds of foods found in family kitchens.

While the pots and pans are small, they are not universally available stainless steel or plastic utensils. Instead, these items are made from the same pottery and glassware used by adults in this region of northern Italy.

This same attention to the special qualities of local life turns up again in the kitchen area of the school. The kitchen is faced with an enormous glass window so that children can watch the cook and the staff at work on lunch. Above this enormous window, the wall is decorated with a handsome display of the kinds of strainers and spoons used in kitchens throughout the region. At the bottom of this display, there is a long string of garlic such as children see in markets and at home. In this way, the culture of children’s families and their community becomes a part of their school environment.

A Particular School with Its Own History

The schools of Reggio Emilia each have particular histories which are kept very much alive. The story of one particular school in Reggio, La Villetta, goes back to 1970. The end of the summer was approaching and the women of a working class neighborhood on the outskirts of Reggio Emilia were growing more upset and restless. Once again, it seemed as if their forceful protests and requests to obtain a school for their young children were going to be ignored. Near their neighborhood, where the city had expanded to meet the countryside, an old house stood empty. The house was still elegant, though it was surrounded by an overgrown garden. One day the women forced the gate, moved into the house, pronounced it the school for their children, and stood fast in occupying the building.

In the days that followed, the women organized their resistance, looked for a teacher, and cleaned and repaired the dusty rooms. One warm late afternoon, while they were working, a beautiful large butterfly entered the house and flew from room to room. The women were elated by the butterfly. They took it as a sign, a message of good fortune for themselves, their children, and their new school.

Since that day the butterfly has become a visible sign of the history of the school. The children designed a colorful butterfly canopy for the entry way of La Villetta. The butterfly now turns up time and time again in children’s paintings, drawings, and collages.
Another part of the school’s story is a tree which used to grow in the lawn outside the windows. The tree was very much a part of the children’s play. They climbed in it, made circles linking their hands to embrace its trunk, and hid under its shade when the sun was too hot. However, the tree became diseased and had to be cut down. The teachers recognized the change and loss involved. Together they and the children put their memories of the tree into a set of tiles which now permanently decorate one of the classroom doorways. Although the actual tree is gone, the tiles record its many different seasons and uses.

An Awareness of Surrounding Space

The teachers of Reggio Emilia also value what is special about the spaces which surround their school. Part of their curriculum involves taking children to explore neighborhoods and landmarks in the city. Some years ago, much teaching and learning centered on a visit to the large stone lion that has guarded the market square for centuries. This trip was planned to help the children get in touch with their own town, its busy daily life, and its history.

Early one morning, children and teachers took the public bus from the school to the historic center of Reggio Emilia. They walked to the market square, busy already with people bargaining and buying at the cloth, hardware, vegetable, and fruit stalls. Finally, after working through the crowd, they came in view of the stone lion. As the children were carefully prepared for this trip, they spotted it immediately and ran toward it. They surrounded the large tame wild animal; they looked at it from all sides; they touched it and felt the cold texture of the rough stone; they climbed on the lion, played with its mane, and explored its large empty eyes watching the busy crowd in the market. Then they started sketching on the large pads brought for that purpose.

Back in school, children and adults talked about the stone lion, and the children’s observations were taped. Later, the slides taken during the trip and close-up shots of the lion were projected; the children played with these images and observed details that had escaped them or else recognized others they had stored in their minds. This renewed visit with the lion stirred them to relive the experience in several different ways: some of them built shapes to use in the shadow theater, some started painting the lion seen from different perspectives, and some worked with clay to reproduce its uneven texture and strong shape.

The whole experience, from that early morning trip to these new images that tell the story and to the many representations of the lion that are in the rich space of the school, touches many aspects of learning that form the core of this program for young children. The story of the visit to the stone lion can be read through the eyes of the teachers by looking at the photographs and through the eyes of the children by looking at their sketches and drawings, which all decorate one of the walls in the school.

The schools in Reggio Emilia could not be just anywhere. On the one hand, the garden, the walls, the tall windows, the handsome furniture all say This is a place where adults have thought about the quality of space. The schools are full of light, variety, and a certain kind of joy. In addition, however, teachers, parents, and children working and playing together have created a very particular space: a space which reflects their personal lives, the history of the school, and the immediate culture and geography of their lives.

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Reprinted from “Designing Indoor Spaces” (Beginnings, Summer 1984).
Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins

by Loris Malaguzzi

These comments are translated and adapted from a seminar presented by Professor Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia, Italy, June 1993.

There are hundreds of different images of the child. Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image. For example, if your image is that boys and girls are very different from one another, you will behave differently in your interactions with each of them.

The environment you construct around you and the children also reflects this image you have about the child. There’s a difference between the environment that you are able to build based on a preconceived image of the child and the environment that you can build that is based on the child you see in front of you — the relationship you build with the child, the games you play. An environment that grows out of your relationship with the child is unique and fluid. The quality and quantity of relationships among you as adults and educators also reflects your image of the child. Children are very sensitive and can see and sense very quickly the spirit of what is going on among the adults in their world. They understand whether the adults are working together in a truly collaborative way or if they are separated in some way from each other, living their experience as if it were private with little interaction.

Posing Important Questions

When you begin working with children in the morning, you must, as adults, pose questions about the children, such as: “When are these children really going to begin socializing?” And at the same time the children will pose questions to the adults: “When are the adults really going to begin socializing?” This is a dialogue that needs to be continual between the adults and the children. The adults ask questions from the world of adults to the children. The children will ask questions to the adults. The expectations that the children have of the adults and the adults have of the children are important. We must spend some time talking about these expectations.

The family — mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents — is also involved in this questioning. Daily they need to ask: “What is this child doing in the school?”

It’s very probable that once a day, maybe twice or three times or many times a day, the children are asking themselves: “What is my mother doing?” “What is my father doing?” “What is my brother or my sister doing?” “Are they having more fun than I am?” “Are they bored?”

The school we are talking about is not the school you are familiar with in the past, but it is something that you can hope for.

Considering Each Child’s Reality

We can never think of the child in the abstract. When we think about a child, when we pull out a child to look at, that child is already tightly connected and linked to a certain reality of the world — she has relationships and experiences. We cannot separate this child from a particular reality. She brings these experiences, feelings, and relationships into school with her.
And it is the same for you as adults. When you enter the school in the morning, you carry with you pieces of your life — your happiness, your sadness, your hopes, your pleasures, the stresses from your life. You never come in an isolated way; you always come with pieces of the world attached to you. So the meetings that we have are always contaminated with the experiences that we bring with us.

**Growing Comfortable with the Unknown**

School is not at all like billiards. When you play billiards you push the ball with a certain force and it hits the table and bounces off; there’s a definite way the ball will go, depending on force and direction. Children are not at all like this, predictable. But sometimes schools function as if they were; these are schools with no joy.

Of course, many things that happen in school can be seen ahead and planned beforehand. But many things that happen cannot be known ahead of time. Something will start to grow inside the child and suddenly what is happening in the school will move in that direction. Sometimes what happens starts inside the adults. School can never be always predictable. We need to be open to what takes place and able to change our plans and go with what might grow at that very moment both inside the child and inside ourselves.

Each one of us needs to be able to play with the things that are coming out of the world of children. Each one of us needs to have curiosity, and we need to be able to try something new based on the ideas that we collect from the children as they go along. Life has to be somewhat agitated and upset, a bit restless, somewhat unknown. As life flows with the thoughts of the children, we need to be open, we need to change our ideas; we need to be comfortable with the restless nature of life.

All of this changes the role of the teacher, a role that becomes much more difficult and complex. It also makes the world of the teacher more beautiful, something to become involved in.

**Enjoying Relationships**

The ability to enjoy relationships and work together is very important. Children need to enjoy being in school, they need to love their school and the interactions that take place there. Their expectations of these interactions is critical.

It is also important for the teachers to enjoy being with the other teachers, to enjoy seeing the children stretch their capacities and use their intelligences, to enjoy interactions with the children. Both parts are essential.

Both children and adults need to feel active and important — to be rewarded by their own efforts, their own intelligences, their own activity and energy. When a child feels these things are valued, they become a fountain of strength for him. He feels the joy of working with adults who value his work and this is one of the bases for learning.

Overactivity on the part of the adult is a risk factor. The adult does too much because he cares about the child; but this creates a passive role for the child in her own learning.

**Finding Our Way in the Forest**

All of this is a great forest. Inside the forest is the child. The forest is beautiful, fascinating, green, and full of hopes; there are no paths. Although it isn’t easy, we have to make our own paths, as teachers and children and families, in the forest. Sometimes we find ourselves together within the forest, sometimes we may get lost from each other, sometimes we’ll greet each other from far away across the forest; but it’s living together in this forest that is important. And this living together is not easy.

We have to find each other in the forest and begin to discuss what the education of the child actually means. The important aspect is not just to promote the education of the child but the health and happiness of the child as well.

We need to think of the school as a living organism. Children have to feel that the world is inside the school and moves and thinks and works and reflects on everything that goes on. Of course not all children are the same — each child brings a part of something that’s different into the school.

**Learning to Wait**

All of this pushes us to produce a higher level of observation. We must move beyond just looking at the child to become better observers, able to penetrate
into the child to understand each child’s resources and potential and present state of mind. We need to compare these with our own in order to work well together.

Our task is to construct educational situations that we propose to the children in the morning. It’s okay to improvise sometimes but we need to plan the project. It may be a project that is projected over a period of days, or weeks, or even months. We need to produce situations in which children learn by themselves, in which children can take advantage of their own knowledge and resources autonomously, and in which we guarantee the intervention of the adult as little as possible. We don’t want to teach children something that they can learn by themselves. We don’t want to give them thoughts that they can come up with by themselves. What we want to do is activate within children the desire and will and great pleasure that comes from being the authors of their own learning.

We need to know how to recognize a new presence, how to wait for the child. This is something that is learned, it’s not automatic. We often have to do it against our own rush to work in our own way. We’ll discover that our presence, which has to be visible and warm, makes it possible for us to try to get inside the child and what that child is doing. And this may seem to be passive, but it is really a very strong activity on our part.

**Becoming Totally Involved**

It’s a constant value for the children to know that the adult is there, attentive and helpful, a guide for the child. Perhaps this way of working with the child will build a different understanding of our role than we have had before. Clarifying the meaning of our presence and our being with children is something that is vital for the child. When the child sees that the adult is there, totally involved with the child, the child doesn’t forget. This is something that’s right for us and it’s right for the children.

There are many things that are part of a child’s life just as they are part of an adult’s life. The desire to do something for someone, for instance. Every adult has a need to feel that we are seen/observed by others. (Observing others is also important.) This is just as true for children as for adults. Therefore, it’s possible to observe, to receive a lot of pleasure and satisfaction from observing in many different ways.

When the child is observed, the child is happy — it’s almost an honor that he is observed by an adult. On the other hand, a good teacher who knows how to observe feels good about himself because that person knows that he is able to take something from the situation, transform it, and understand it in a new way.

What the child doesn’t want is an observation from the adult who isn’t really there, who is distracted. The child wants to know that she is observed, carefully, with full attention. The child wants to be observed in action. She wants the teacher to see the process of her work, rather than the product. The teacher asks the child to take a bucket of water from one place to the other. It’s not important to the child that the teacher only sees him arrive with the bucket of water at the end. What is important to the child is that the teacher sees the child while the child is working, while the child is putting out the effort to accomplish the task — the processes are important, how much the child is putting into the effort, how heroic the child is doing this work. What children want is to be observed while engaged, they do not want the focus of the observation to be on the final product. When we as adults are able to see the children in the process, it’s as if we are opening a window and getting a fresh view of things.

“If only you had seen all I had to do.” The child wants this observation. We all want this. This means that when you learn to observe the child, when you have assimilated all that it means to observe the child, you learn many things that are not in books — educational or psychological. And when you have done this you will learn to have more diffidence and more distrust of rapid assessments, tests, judgments. The child wants to be observed, but she doesn’t want to be judged. Even when we do judge, things escape us, we do not see things, so we are not able to evaluate in a wide way. This system of observing children carries you into many different feelings and thoughts, into a kind of teaching full of uncertainty and doubt, and it takes wisdom and a great deal of knowledge on the part of the teachers to be able to work within this situation of uncertainty.

**Discovering a New Way of Observing**

Observing in this way offers tremendous benefits. It requires a shift in the role of the teacher from an emphasis of teaching to an emphasis on learning, teachers learning about themselves as teachers as well as teachers learning about children. This is a
self-learning that takes place for the teacher and it enables the teacher to see things that are taking place in children that teachers were not able to see before.

We have to let children be with children. Children learn a lot from other children, and adults learn from children being with children. Children love to learn among themselves, and they learn things that it would never be possible to learn from interactions with an adult. The interaction between children is a very fertile and a very rich relationship. If it is left to ferment without adult interference and without that excessive assistance that we sometimes give, then it’s more advantageous to the child. We don’t want to protect something that doesn’t need to be protected.

It’s important for the teacher who works with young children to understand that she knows little about children. Teachers need to learn to see the children, to listen to them, to know when they are feeling some distance from us as adults and from children, when they are distracted, when they are surrounded by a shadow of happiness and pleasure, and when they are surrounded by a shadow of sadness and suffering. We have to understand that they are moving and working with many ideas, but their most important task is to build relationships with friends. They are trying to understand what friendship is. Children grow in many directions together, but a child is always in search of relationships. Children get to know each other through all their senses. Touching the hair of another child is very important. Smell is important. This is a way children are able to understand the identity of themselves and the identity of others.

Redefining Roles

We need to define the role of the adult, not as a transmitter but as a creator of relationships — relationships not only between people but also between things, between thoughts, with the environment. It’s like we need to create a typical New York City traffic jam in the school.

We teachers must see ourselves as researchers, able to think, and to produce a true curriculum, a curriculum produced from all of the children.

What we so often do is impose adult time on children’s time and this negates children being able to work with their own resources.

When we in Reggio say children have 100 languages, we mean more than the 100 languages of children, we also mean the 100 languages of adults, of teachers. The teacher must have the capacity for many different roles. The teacher has to be the author of a play, someone who thinks ahead of time. Teachers also need to be the main actors in the play, the protagonists. The teacher must forget all the lines he knew before and invent the ones he doesn’t remember. Teachers also have to take the role of the prompter, the one who gives the cues to the actors. Teachers need to be set designers who create the environment in which activities take place. At the same time, the teacher needs to be the audience who applauds.

The teacher has many different roles and she needs to be in many places and do many different things and use many languages. Sometimes the teacher will find himself without words, without anything to say; and at times this is fortunate for the child, because then the teacher will have to invent new words.

Forging Alliances with Families

We must forge strong alliances with the families of our children. Imagine the school as an enormous hot air balloon. The hot air balloon is on the ground when the parents bring their children in the morning. Some parents think the balloon is going to rise up and fly around during the day. Others would really prefer that the balloon remain on the ground because they are sure their children are safe and protected. But the children want to go up and fly and travel everywhere in a hot air balloon, to see in this different way, to look at things from above. Our problem is that to make the hot air balloon fly we have to make sure that parents understand the importance of what the teachers and children are doing in the hot air balloon. Flying through the air, seeing the world in a different way, adds to the wealth of all of us, particularly the children.

We need to make a big impression on parents, amaze them, convince them that what we are doing is something extremely important for their children and for them, that we are producing and working with children to understand their intelligence and their intelligences. This means that we have to become skilled in flying and managing this hot air balloon. Perhaps it was our previous lack of skill that made us fall. We all need to learn to be better hot air balloon pilots.
Building Strong Images

What we have to do now is draw out the image of the child, draw the child out of the desperate situations that many children find themselves in. If we redeem the child from these difficult situations, we redeem ourselves.

Children have a right to a good school — a good building, good teachers, right time, good activities. This is the right of ALL children.

It is necessary to give an immediate response to a child. Children need to know that we are their friends, that they can depend on us for the things they desire, that we can support them in the things that they have, but also in the things that they dream about, that they desire.

Children have the right to imagine. We need to give them full rights of citizenship in life and in society.

It’s necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold.

Those who have the image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don’t need that as an image of children.

Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and of their strengths.

Translated by Baji Rankin, Leslie Morrow, and Lella Gandini.

Loris Malaguzzi
February 23, 1920 — January 30, 1994

Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, began teaching in schools started by parents just after the end of WWII. Through the years, he transformed that courageous initiative into the internationally acclaimed program for young children that we know today.

Those who worked with Malaguzzi or heard him speak have vivid memories of an intense learning experience — his philosophical reflections, surprising observations, challenges of conventional thoughts in education, unexpected turns of thought, complexity of ideas, and delightful metaphors. One way to pay tribute to Loris Malaguzzi is to listen to his words:

“Our goal is to build an amiable school, where children, teachers and families feel at home. Such a school requires careful thinking and planning concerning procedures, motivations and interests. It must embody ways of getting along together, of intensifying relationships.”