

# Innovations

in early education: *the international Reggio exchange*

PUBLISHED BY THE MERRILL-PALMER INSTITUTE, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

## THE PATH TOWARD KNOWLEDGE:

## The Social, Political and Cultural Context of the Reggio Municipal Infant-Toddler Center and Preschool Experience

THE QUARTERLY  
PERIODICAL OF THE  
NORTH AMERICAN  
REGGIO EMILIA  
ALLIANCE

*vol. 11, no. 2*  
*Spring 2004*

### WHAT'S INSIDE

Our Montessori Journey  
with Reggio: Living with  
Paradox and Dualities

Parallels and Contrasts:  
Reggio Emilia and  
Montessori

NAREA Column:  
Reflections on the  
Reggio International  
Conference

Conference Calendar

"The Hundred Languages of  
Children" Exhibit Schedule

*by Sergio Spaggiari*

*Sergio Spaggiari is the Director of the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d' Infanzia - Municipality of Reggio Emilia. The following is based on Sergio's presentation during the March 2003 study tour. The editors would like to thank his translator, Jane McCall, for her contribution to the publication of this article.*

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the experience of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of the municipality of Reggio Emilia. In order to reflect on these past 40 years, we organized a one-day conference that took place last week, titled "Rehearsing the Future - Dialogues with History and with the Contemporary, Seeking Traces of Possible Futures for the World and for Education." Rather than looking back at 40 years that have gone by, we wanted to look forward to the 40 years that are coming towards us. We tried to look into the future, the future of our experience and the future of education. We wanted to challenge ourselves to think about our tomorrow.

In looking towards the future, we may be in a similar position to the one in which Loris Malaguzzi found himself 40 years ago. Malaguzzi often reminded us, "At the beginning, we knew nothing. We were illiterate about childhood and illiterate about education. But we had a lot of questions inside. We had so much desire to know and so many questions to ask. We knew that we didn't know." So Malaguzzi made a declaration of ignorance. Maybe this is the right attitude to take . . . a humble attitude, a modest attitude. Maybe this attitude is what helps us to lay out the right questions and to take the right path. You know that the wise man is not he who knows the answers but he who asks the right questions. The right questions

*continued on next page*

generate knowledge. The questions we asked were what began our research and started us on the path of our exploration. The right questions are not a sign of ignorance; they are a comfort that sets us off in the right direction. Our declaration of ignorance helped us to realize how little we actually knew about children and about childhood.

This attitude to move forward with research has always been important, however much we knew we didn't know. I think "walk on" is a good metaphor for what we do. There are two ways that people think about walking on or moving forward. Some people think that to walk, you need to know where you want to go and how to get there. Other people, moved by sentiment or passion, by dreams or ideals, move toward something that they don't yet know or understand. They don't know what their final destination will be. So there are people who think knowledge should be before the walking starts and people who



think that you learn as you walk. I think it is very important to have the courage to risk finding things out as you proceed. There would be no research and no researchers if people had to know things before they set out. Researchers are people who put themselves on the line. When you walk this way, you run the risk of being moved by a dream, a utopian dream. We also know that utopian dreams in the last century have created major disasters, especially when they are accompanied by totalitarian ideology, fanaticism and fundamentalism. What is the purpose of a utopia? In my view, it serves to make you go on, to not stay still and inert, to not accept immobility as a strategy for life. That is why it is important to know how to move on and to accompany our walking with knowing how to ask. It is the walking that makes the road. When many people walk, they create a path. They orient themselves and find their direction by knowing how to ask questions.

So, our work began with a declaration of ignorance but a great desire to move on and to ask questions. Today, we are still convinced that we don't know enough, that we have a long road before us because there is so much to learn. To do this, I think it is absolutely necessary to have an enormous passion inside for this work. You have to have reasons and motivations. You have to be moved by the desire to find out and to know. To work with passion means to keep the head and the heart in contact. Malaguzzi often conjured up the image of a giraffe. The giraffe, he said, is a bit unfortunate in this respect. He's the most unhappy animal of the earth. With his long, long neck, his head is far removed from his heart. Malaguzzi wrote a poem about the giraffe, which reads, "How unhappy is the giraffe, who fell in love on Sunday and on Monday, he doesn't know it." This happens when the heart and the brain are a distance from each other. Think how often this happens in school and education. Think how often rationality and cold reasoning have precedence over emotion and feelings, and how difficult it is to achieve a union between the two. Think how often this distance between the head and the heart creates oversight, boredom, monotony and repetition in school.

The last centuries of our history have been obsessed with limits: geographical limits and borders, divisions in specific fields and disciplines, religious limits and limits to rationality. I think Malaguzzi's attitude was to see the limits and immediately go through them. The

impulse of our experience has often taken us well over the limits. Many of you have seen the exhibition, "The Hundred Languages of Children." The original title of that exhibition was "If the Eye Jumps Over the Wall." It meant that the children's eyes and the adults' eyes must see beyond the wall. This is our aspiration . . . to be able to jump over walls. Children want to go over the wall . . . to go over the wall of banality, to go over the wall of established educational procedures. That is why we chose this title for our first exhibition. It is important to acquire the skill of going over walls, going beyond boundaries, seeing limits and passing through them because, in everyone's life, there are times when you will find barriers that seem impassable, when there are obstacles you feel you cannot overcome. To be able to go over the wall means you can topple cultural paradigms that seem fixed. It means you can turn things on their head. It means you can start with fresh eyes.

In our experience, it has been important to have what I call a "transgressive attitude." In Reggio Emilia, we have made many choices to transgress or go beyond arbitrary limits. The first choice was to believe strongly in the ability of children. Forty years ago, providing care for very small children meant to have strong arms to pick them up. There was a kind of nursing pedagogy and it was necessary to know how to look after children, to take care of children. The idea that we brought into the school focused on what the children carried with them when they came to us. They brought their intelligence, their potential and the rights that are inherent in their existence. We believe that this potential is full of surprises, is unpredictable. We also supported the idea that the child, like a man or woman, can be the builder of his or her own destiny . . . the idea that you can be the central actor in your life, the author and the co-author of your learning and of the knowledge that you build. We agree entirely with Jerome Bruner when he said, "You don't receive knowledge; you build it."

Instead of thinking of education in the traditional way, as limited to the transmission of ideas and abilities from one person to the other, we believe in the idea of education as building knowledge and abilities, producing them. This is the passage from teaching to learning. Teaching has to find a different place for itself. Teaching has to lose this idea of its own centrality to the process. We believe that this reversing of a cultural value has been of enormous importance. We

see it as having gone past a boundary, having gone through what was set out as a limit. Often when we go through a border on our travels, between one country and another, we know that, on the other side, we will find another currency, another language, another set of cultural traditions. Going through this border in education is like entering into another country. We have to reconstruct cultural implications and precepts. That's why, in our research, you'll find we very rarely have pre-defined programs. We have always seen the school as a place where there are continuous and dynamic processes.

What are some of the fundamental aspects that we have been developing in our experience? What are some of the strong elements that have allowed us to move on, to evolve, to build? The first strong value is the importance of parent and family participation. We believe in the idea of the child as an individual who brings their rights, their abilities and their competencies with them into the educational process. But it's not only children who have these things inside them. It is also parents who bring abilities, ideas, knowledge and competencies. We've always considered the family to be an essential element of the educational process. Many, many schools work without making parents the protagonists, the central figures in the education of their children. Sometimes they even blame the parents, who then feel guilty and inadequate, because they aren't able to enter into the educational process. When parents don't participate, I believe it is the responsibility of the school to build itself up in such a way and use all the strategies possible in order to make itself something that the parents can experience with their children. If the school is not participated, the first responsibility lies within the school.

The second strong element is the pedagogy of relationships, educating through relationships. This element exalts and highlights the value of working together in a collegial manner, exchanging opinions, comparing points of view, the dialogue that is possible among children, parents and teachers. Relational pedagogy tells us that the verb "to educate" should only be conjugated in the plural form. You can't educate alone, in solitude or in isolation. You can only educate in relation with other people and in relation with the world.

The third strong point is the one hundred languages of children. This brings us back to the value of the

plurality of different ways of communicating. This idea of the one hundred languages is counter to what is traditional in our culture and is essential to our idea of education. Instead of dividing up the mind and the body, science and humanities, action and thought, intelligence and emotion, we have put them together.

The fourth strong element is listening. Our practice of constant listening, the pedagogy of listening, educating through listening underlines how, over the preceding centuries, listening to each other has not been an important part of living or of educating. Another strong value is documentation, the ability to narrate the story unfolding inside the schools. Documentation is the ability to re-interpret and re-elaborate all the processes of learning that take place inside the school.

Another important element of our work is the rediscovery of creativity, not as some talent that people who are creative geniuses might have, but as an irrefutable part of every person. We also believe in the value of differences. Encountering differences is probably one of the strongest aspects of contemporary life. Accepting, respecting and valuing the differences in others is a great ethical choice, which is possible for every modern person. Differences are not a problem that we annul or eliminate. They are a resource and an opportunity.

In our experience, we have also placed a great deal of importance to aesthetics and beauty. We have never been able to understand why children should have to put up with an environment that is not beautiful. Inside the school, we find places for things of great aesthetic value in music, in art, in literature, in the everyday experience of the child in the environment. It is very important to take care of the quality of the environment. The environment has a silent language, which interacts with the child and can facilitate processes of living, of learning and relating to others.

I urge you to think of the value of organization as well. Few educational or pedagogical books discuss the value of organization. Many only think of organization as an administrative problem of the school, but we believe it is an integral part of the educational process. It is a decisive element of our project inside the school. Organization, in itself, is a pedagogical thought.

Inside our experience, we have invented the space and the idea of the *atelier* and the *atelierista*, the

person who runs the space and the space revolves around. Malaguzzi said, "The *atelier* is an area where we find a teacher working who is specialized in not being specialized." The *atelier* is a place where we give back freshness to experience, where we work to ensure that education does not become repetitive. I believe that repetition is the worst thing that can happen inside the school and can cause the greatest damage.

It is also important to consider the role of the teacher and her education. We have always believed that the teachers are the first builders of their own experience. The teachers are the center of their own professional development. Do you ever wonder where the experience and knowledge we have about children's processes comes from? Malaguzzi believed that the knowledge that we have about children should begin where we find children. If I hear someone talking about children who doesn't spend time with children, I'm a bit suspicious. Libraries, bookshops and documentation centers are full of books about children and education, written by people who have read *other* books about children and education. It is so important that knowledge, hypotheses, theory, predictions, all the ideas about children and their processes begin where the children are, with the teachers.

This is a synthesis of some of the values that were developed with our experience. Although I have summarized, I do not want to simplify these concepts. It is very important to hold onto the complexity of problems and ideas. Unfortunately, many adults who work with children lower the complexity of ideas and concepts. It is not only a problem with teachers. Many people simplify the complexity of problems, when they're called upon to enter the world of children, and fall into this terrible trap of banality. On the contrary, Pablo Picasso had a very good idea of the complexity of the world of children. At the age of 90, just before he died, Pablo Picasso reminded people that, as a child, he was able to paint like Leonardo. But he used to say, "It took me all my life to learn to create art like children's art."

I'd like to conclude with some thoughts a Spanish friend of ours brought to us last week at a moment of reflection on our 40 years. He had some ideas for questions teachers can ask themselves at the end of the day: The first question is: Did I enjoy myself today with the children? It's good to stay with children when you are full of joy, when you are happy and carefree.

*I think it is very important to have the courage to risk finding things out as you proceed. There would be no research and no researchers if people had to know things before they set out. Researchers are people who put themselves on the line.*

*-Sergio Spaggiari*

At the entrance to some of our schools, you'll find the saying in Italian, "*Niente senza gioia*," "Nothing without joy." We think school is life and in life, we find strong emotions like fear, love and friendship. Life is made up of many emotional states. But never let anything or anyone take the joy away from life.

The second question for teachers at the end of the day is: What did I learn today? We said that there is still much to discover about children. So every day, we should know something more than we did the day before and, every day, we should ask: What is it that the children taught me today?

Another question, which was typical of Malaguzzi, is: Did I study today? Have I read? Malaguzzi had infinite curiosity. He would often say, "Close those teaching books and open up books about art, science, literature, architecture and design. Look what culture is creating around you!" So our research has to be carried out, not only inside the classroom but outside, looking around at the world today, the knowledge that is being generated, the culture that is being generated around us. So when I ask: What did I study today? I'm asking: What did I find out from the world? What new things contaminated, in a positive sense, my knowledge and my way of seeing the world today?

Another question for teachers to ask everyday is: What can I narrate about what happened in the school today? This is a question about: What can I document and how can I make documentation about what happened today? It isn't enough to see what is happening; we must listen to the children and to ourselves. We need the ability to give life to a narration, to a story about what is happening. It is essential to give value through this narration and to be able to interpret what took place. This narration brings us back to a very common obsession that teachers have, that is, how to make sense of what they're doing with the children. Too often, we do things that do not make sense to us. Let's learn from children, who are intent on finding out why. They're determined to find out the

meaning of different things around them. We adults have to try and find the meaning of what we are doing with children.

The video "Not Just Anyplace," recounts the story of the history of our schools. It tells of the enormous effort and energy that went into the building of the schools and educational process. In the video, you will learn that the Reggio educators you meet here this week are just tiny people standing on the shoulders of the giants who went before them. We must thank the people who went before us for the inheritance they have left us and for the work that they did. We can say, in Reggio Emilia, that we are truly fortunate. We have infant-toddler centers and preschools. We try to give quality to these schools. But we must never forget that on this planet, there are 120 million children who have no type of school. One hundred and twenty million is the number of children in Europe and America together . . . ten percent of the children in the world. These are not children who live in inaccessible places, on tops of mountains. They live on the outskirts of enormous metropolises . . . places where television has arrived, where advertising has arrived, where cinema has arrived. But school doesn't arrive; no teachers arrive.

UNESCO had a conference 10 years ago in Thailand. At that conference, the authorities solemnly stated their goal to provide education for all the children of the world by the year 2000. The year 2000 has passed but there are still millions of children without school. In 1900, Maria Montessori said, "This is the century of childhood." The 1900s are over and disasters in the world of childhood have not ceased. As educators, we firmly believe in optimism and in hope. We have faith. We, as educators, don't want to stop; we want to carry on, walking forward. We must remember that all children on the planet should be walking on with us. All children on the planet, from the north and south, east and west, and from every background, should be a part of this walk together with us.