

Lynn White has been a first grade teacher at Greeley Elementary in the Winnetka Public Schools in Winnetka, Illinois for 18 years. She has been studying the Reggio educational philosophy for 13 years, and visited the schools in Reggio Emilia in 1991 and 1999. The following is an interview based on the article, "The Path Toward Knowledge: The Social, Political and Cultural Context of the Reggio Municipal Infant-Toddler Center and Preschool Experience" by Sergio Spaggiari, Director of the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia, Municipality of Reggio Emilia, which appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange. Excerpts from this article appear before each interview question and are indicated in italics.

Reflections from an American Context on "The Path Toward Knowledge": An Interview with Lynn White

By Judith Allen Kaminsky and Lella Gandini

You know that the wise man is not he who knows the answers but he who asks the right questions. The right questions 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.

Q: Will you comment on your own growth, in terms of knowing how to ask questions of yourself and of the children in order to better understand your ideas and theirs, and to better extend conversations and explorations in the classroom?

LYNN: Although asking questions is one of the keys to learning, I believe it is also one of the most challenging tasks in learning. I have found that the process of taking the time to make predictions and talk together with colleagues *before* creating the questions is crucial. This process helps us to begin to consider what it is that we want to know and then, in turn, we are able to discuss how best to word the questions for the children. I have also come to see how difficult it is to question children without leading them down a certain path.

In addition, I have learned that the order of the questions as the conversation develops is also very important. Oftentimes, I begin with a list of pre-planned questions. The first question is usually broad and open-ended, and can lead us down other paths. It is a critical time. As I lead the conversation, I must decide whether to go down a new path, continue with my pre-planned list or do both. Most often, I think I end up doing both. I have also found that it is not always easy to know when the conversation should end, so this is another critical decision I have to make in the process. I have observed that children are used to raising their hands to answer a question. Although this process may work for asking questions and answering questions, it does not necessarily lend itself to having a conversation.

I believe that children must have the opportunity to engage in conversation, so that they know how to participate in this way. In my opinion, the skill of being able to participate in a conversation where opinions and ideas are stated, heard, respected and built upon is a key ingredient in classroom exploration. I have found that my research, concerning conversations and communication with children in

my classroom, has led me to become more aware of conversation and communication in my life. I appreciate and value the fact that my learning about learning is like a blanket, which covers and affects all aspects of my life.

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.

Q: How have you been able to change your style of teaching in order to travel on the path of knowledge along with the children? How are you able to relax and let the course of the children's learning evolve along with your own? How have you been able to give up teaching to reach pre-determined outcomes?

LYNN: For me, it is about pausing when you are used to moving forward. It is about listening when you are used to talking. It is about "staying with" children and their learning during an experience. It is about taking the time to find, capture and relish the joy of learning *with* children. It is also about revisiting an experience afterwards, whether it is through listening to a taped conversation, reading a transcription, looking at drawings or discussing observations. But, above all, it is essential to revisit the experience with others.

I believe that when you move along the path of learning *with* children, there is a give and take. A rhythm emerges, and there are ebbs and flows. It is at these times when we, as teachers, must call upon ourselves to participate in the highest level of observation and interaction with children, as we work to ask the right questions at the right times to support the learning or offer a provocation.

I believe you learn to relax by having the intention to relax, and suspend judgement and action. It is very important to create the intention in your mind's eye

first, so that the possibility/desire exists. It is often difficult for me to create the intention/desire while I am in the midst of teaching, but if it exists *before* I begin, then it is in the forefront of my thinking and, therefore, my actions with children.

I believe that once you are involved in an experience that is evolving with the children, it is also very important to learn to become comfortable with the feelings of uncertainty that arise. My feelings of uncertainty are often about where to go next; what questions to ask in each step; when to ask the questions and when to observe, listen, watch and/or participate; and about knowing when an experience is over. Over the years, I continue to realize that when uncertainty arises, I must work to trust my own

instincts as a teacher; trust my students (they need to know and feel that I believe in them); and talk with my colleagues, ask them questions, and share and reflect with them.

Although there are times when I am teaching to reach pre-determined outcomes, there are now times when I am teaching and learning in new ways with children. As a first grade teacher, I see the importance of the balance between the spiraling development of children's levels and skills, and the mastery and development of children's abilities through explorations and experiences that arise throughout the year. When I speak about "the spiraling development of children's levels and skills," I am referring to the conceptual development of children's emotional, social, physical and intellectual growth over time in

the various fields of knowledge (language arts, mathematics, science, social studies and the arts). As a teacher of first graders, I feel it is my obligation to know and understand the "umbrella" of this conceptual development so that I am able to offer a balance of experiences, some created by the first grade team of teachers at certain times of the year with specific outcomes in mind and some emerging with the children, based on our observations/interactions. I have found that working in this way allows me to support

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children in the process of "uncovering" the skills and concepts of learning rather than "covering" the skills and concepts of first grade. I have observed that the experiences that emerge and evolve always take us further than I predicted or would have expected, and the result continues to excite me and feed my passion for teaching and learning.

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.

Q: How has the daily life in your classroom passed from teaching to learning? How have you been able to make that shift, in terms of your own attitudes and responses to the children? How have the children reacted to this non-traditional approach to teaching?

LYNN: When I read these questions, I immediately began to think of the importance of the children's perspectives and theories about learning, knowing that their experiences would shape their answers to my questions. When I asked a small group of first grade children in my class if they could tell me "the ways you learn," these were some of their responses:

listening
letting other children and you help me
writing it down
working together
reading a book . . . like if I read a fairy tale, I will learn a lesson and if I read a chick book, I will learn facts about chicks
You have a way of explaining that I get quickly.
reading or looking at science books
building/creating structures in the blocks
I learned good ways to make structures by building a lot.
I've learned how to draw better by drawing more.
I draw better undersea pictures because Kevin taught me.
I learn by writing poetry. Now I write poetry everywhere.

I sometimes learn with other people in projects. I've also learned to say "I'm sorry" and that others are there to help.

by playing and having fun

I then asked, "What do you learn when you are playing and having fun?"

I learn to create and destroy. When I get my idea, I create it. It is hard for me to destroy my idea, especially if I like it a lot, but I've learned that there is sometimes a bigger, better idea.

Then I asked, "What is the best way to learn for you?"

doing things

In choosing time, I've learned a lot about friendship.

drawing pictures

looking outside

looking at the globe

in gym, so I can learn new games

with friends because they offer their ideas and help me

with you

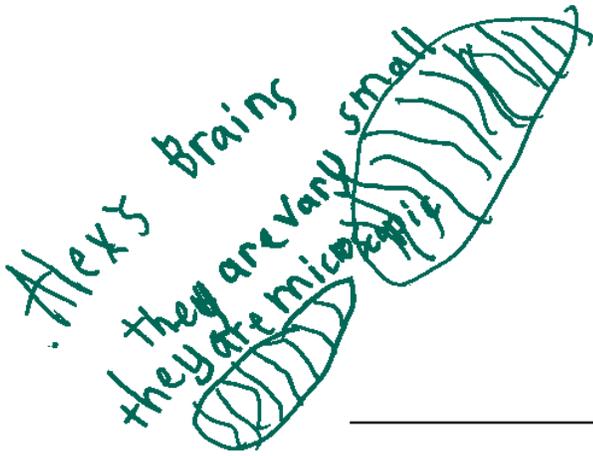
As I thought about the concept of "the ways in which we learn" instead of only "what we learn," I began to wonder about their views of how learning grows, so I asked, "Do you think learning grows?" Each child excitedly responded with "Yes!" So I asked, "How does learning grow?"

You learn more things everyday.

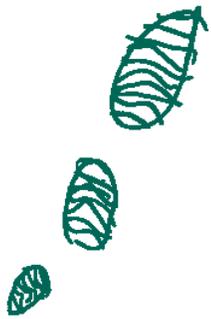
Every day, it gets bigger and bigger.

Luke said, "You don't know as much on your first day. The questions are hard but they get easier and easier, as you've done it for more days. The questions get harder and harder but you're more ready for it, 'cause you've done the more easier ones. You've done the first group and that makes the second easier. They can't just give you the second group. I think learning grows . . . (pause) it sort of grows . . . (pause) your brain doesn't know as much but then, once you've done more of the questions, your brain knows more." Then moments later in the conversation, he added, "From thinking comes learning. Then you learn and know more. As your brain knows more, it puts together ideas and can take a whole bunch of problems and make a bigger idea because it knows more - that's how ideas start. Your brain puts together a whole bunch of other ideas."

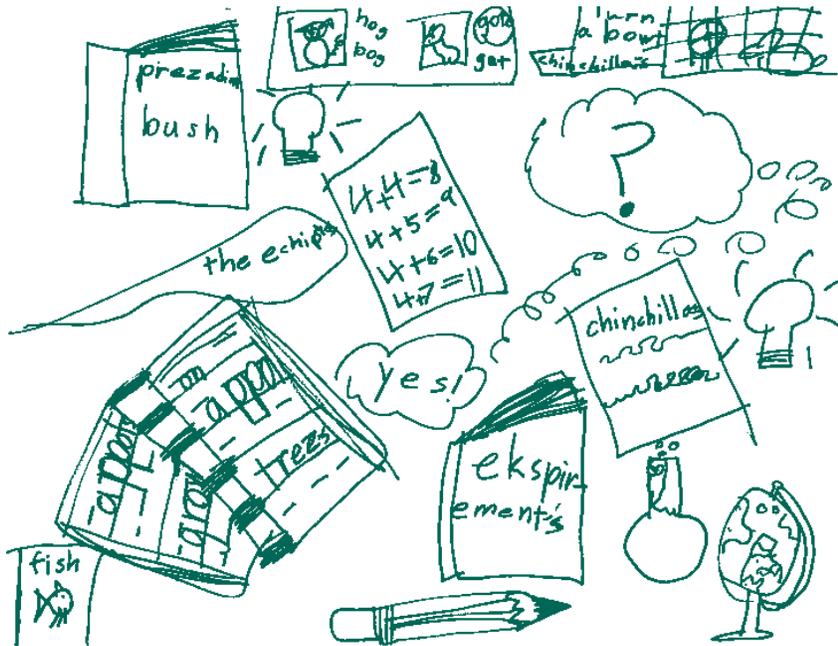
At this point, I began to wonder how they would express these ideas through the language of graphic representation, so I asked them to close their eyes and try to get an image in their mind of learning growing. Then I said, "When you are ready, draw what you think learning looks like as it grows." As always, their thinking and drawings amazed me!



Learning is growing and happening. It is a brain . . . When it's growing, your brain goes 'bing' again and the curvy edges become straight. Then your brain goes on to learn something else, but what you've already learned stays in your brain.
-Jonathan, 7 years



Your brain grows as learning grows.
-Alex, 7 years



Learning grows from reading and watching . . . talking about things . . . still thinking . . . learning about the world . . . an idea!
-Audrey, 7 years

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Sloppy numbers become neat numbers.
-Bailey, 7 years

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

I believe that a child is not an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge delivered from teachers; a child comes to us as a full vessel. It is our job to uncover who the child is as a learner and to support the learning of each individual child, as we work together as a community of learners in the classroom. This has always been my philosophy but I think that over the years, I continue to learn more and more about how to make this philosophy visible in my classroom every

day. I find that this is a very natural way for the children to learn. As one parent wrote in a recent reflection of her observations from a project, "I noticed incredible community . . . I also noticed that they created, wrote, played, danced and painted with *absolute* confidence . . . I observed absolute joy. Give children an all-encompassing challenge and they will become enthralled. In my opinion, reaching children and parents in this way, is what learning is really all about."

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.

Q: What evidence have you found of the value of educating through relationships? What experiences from your classroom can you share that highlight the way you and the children are learning in relation with other people and the world?

LYNN: In my view, relationships are at the center of life and learning. I believe that the first and most fundamental aspect of work with children is forming a trusting, consistent, genuine relationship with them. When thinking about experiences that highlight the way we learn in relation to other people and the world, a recent study comes to mind. After working together at the same grade level for three to four years, my two colleagues and I decided to have a common experience together this past year. It began in the fall when a father in another first grade class, Mr. Benedetto, offered his talents as an artist to work with the children. In addition, our school had worked with a dance artist, Debbie Kristofek, earlier in the school year on story writing and dance. We, as teachers, had also noticed a strong desire on the children's part to bring nature into the classroom and study nature in various ways throughout the year. I recalled that years ago, the children at Greeley had studied the bluff located at the beach near our school, as part of a stewardship program with the park district. Since that time, I had always wanted to revisit the bluff in some way.

We were intrigued by the possibilities provided by studying an outdoor space within the children's community. We considered the ways we could connect art, motion and nature through an emergent process. In this case, the seed of the project came from teacher observation, parent participation and an available dance artist with a willingness to extend her earlier work with the children in any way that evolved. At the end of April, we began what turned out to be a seven-week project called "Motion and the Bluff." During this experience, the children theorized about what a bluff is and participated in various field studies to the bluff. We chose to create research groups based on the children's drawings, theories and interests. Some explored and researched motion on the bluff, some explored and researched motion under the bluff and some explored poetry writing, writing poems about the bluff during the day and at night.

We understood that committing ourselves to cross-classroom groups (62 children total) would entail significant flexibility and organizational planning. Yet we felt strongly that this would provide the children an opportunity to learn from each other in new ways. We, as teachers, were excited to get to know the children from other classes in new ways as well. After the initial research and work was completed by each group, we shared the children's drawings, conversations, research and a list of what they wondered about with Mr. Benedetto and Debbie. Based on the children's work thus far, Mr. Benedetto wondered if they might be interested in creating a sculpture of the entire bluff. Debbie suggested working with each study group to create a movement piece using the rondo form (3 phrases with the pattern ABACA). Over the next two weeks, Debbie met with each study group to choreograph their dances. Once again, we created cross-classroom interest-based

groups to work on the sculpture with Mr. Benedetto. They were: 1) building the bluff, 2) working above the bluff, 3) working under the water, 4) working under the bluff, and 5) working on the bluff.

When the research and dances were complete, and the bluff sculpture was installed, we asked the children how they wanted to share their work. The children said they wanted to share it with their parents, siblings, grandparents, buddies, other teachers and friends. Together we came up with a list of ways to share and, once again, children made choices based on their interests. Sharing groups included: reading aloud, drawing for the mural, playing instruments, and painting the mural for nature shadow puppets. For the last two weeks of school, we worked in our sharing groups and then had a "parent sharing" to tell our story and celebrate this experience together!

In this study, we teachers learned many things but a few things I would like to highlight are: 1) the idea of creating relationships, and working with a father and a dance artist in school, and 2) the idea of flexible groupings, which allowed us to know others and work with others in new ways. New relationships were formed and we believe the depth of learning was enhanced as a result. This study also allowed us the opportunity to go out into the world with a purpose to observe and explore, then return to the classroom in order to study and research further. The children were able to represent their learning through movement and with various materials. Finally, they worked to communicate this experience to those who are most important to them. Through the sculpture, we were able to bring some of the outside world into the

life of the school. Through the sharing, we were able to bring our parents, grandparents and other community members into the life of the school as well. The parents had the opportunity to discover a "window into the thinking and learning" of their children.



I have found that working in this way allows me to support children in the process of "uncovering" the skills and concepts of learning rather than "covering" the skills and concepts of first grade. I have observed that the experiences that emerge and evolve always take us further than I predicted or would have expected, and the result continues to excite me and feed my passion for teaching and learning.

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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 which can facilitate processes of living, of learning and relating to others.

Q: How has the environment of your classroom served as "a silent language, which interacts with the child"? What are some changes that you have made in your classroom environment in order to facilitate learning and relationships?

LYNN: Throughout my teaching career, I have been drawn to and fascinated by learning environments. Since my initial visit to Reggio Emilia in 1991, I have studied and researched the idea of learning environments on a variety of levels. This question centers around the classroom environment and the changes I have made. I will begin to answer by stating that my classroom environment has evolved over time. With each new exploration came a layer of experimentation for me. I know that, although I've grown to appreciate and enjoy my classroom space in ways I had never considered (like walking in daily and noticing the sun shining through the bamboo on the roof of the wooden loft), I do realize that it is always evolving and never stagnant.

A number of years ago, I began my journey with environment exploration through the use of mirrors. I placed a large mirror in the block area, created a display area in my studio with a mirror underneath and another mirror standing up behind whatever is on display, and placed a large mirror on a shelf in the studio, where children always put baby food jars filled with translucent materials. I also placed mirrors by found nature items for children to create displays on and put small circular mirrors in a pattern down low on the wall by the classroom door. Over the years, I

have observed children looking in the mirrors at themselves moving in different ways, using the mirrors for self-portrait drawings or for making facial expressions, realizing that words held up to a mirror look the opposite in the mirror, challenging themselves to build half structures with the blocks using the mirror's reflection to create the other half, and exploring perspective and point of view through the use of mirrors.

Another example of an environment change is the creation of a classroom studio. What used to be a corner of my classroom with a kidney-shaped reading table, has now become a frequently used space, with what I have observed to be unlimited potential. The studio space, which is quite small, consists of shelves for storage of materials (brought from home by the children), a display shelf (with the mirrors I mentioned earlier), a table for working (with a mirror on the wall at the head of the table), an easel, a light box and a small round table with a mosaic top (which was designed and created by a class one year). I believe this invites children to explore the possibilities that materials offer, to use materials to represent their ideas and/or their learning, to see materials as a language of communication, and to have the opportunity to think, work and create in relationship with others.

Often the seemingly small, incremental steps I took with the environment led to larger changes. An example of this was the creation of a two-story loft near a window in the room. This structure was designed by a class of first graders and built by a father who enjoys a woodworking hobby. Over the last eight years, this structure has been used in a variety of ways: as personal space, set up by individual children for two day

periods; as a place to read, write, think, draw or do scientific research; and as a place for imaginative play, like a bank, library, bookstore and nature museum (with undersea animals on the bottom and land animals placed on the top floor). The pulley and rope, which hang from the roof's highest point, have created endless opportunities as well. The location of the loft created a small unused, unique-shaped space in the corner of our classroom that, in turn, led to the design and creation of a wooden bench for that space a few years later. Again, it was designed by children and built by a father. It now has a small round stand with a desk lamp beside it, which gives the corner a soft, calm feel. This bench has been used in a multitude of ways, as it is the central piece of this "little nook" area for 1 to 3 children to gather, talk, read, sing, braid yarn, work with clipboards or chalkboards, look at nature collections, etc.

Another change, which also involved a design from the children and a father as builder, is the 12-foot, 2-step platform we have in our room. The platform was built in two 6-foot sections so that it can be placed in a variety of shapes. Each of the two steps is 2 feet wide and 6 inches tall. Although this platform has been used for class meetings and/or conversations as well as role playing and creative drama, it is most often used to build designs with pattern blocks or cuisenaire rods, to build small environments with blocks and/or math materials and to create marble mazes, all of which are often left up over periods of time so that work continues from day to day.

In our school, parents sign up at Open House in the fall to bring class snacks for two weeks during the year. My snack sign-up changed about five years ago from "Snack Sign-Up" to "Snack and Flowers Sign-Up." Each week, we enjoy a bouquet of flowers, which add a colorful touch of beauty. From time to time, we have roses in the vases throughout the room. As they begin to wilt, we place the petals in a basket in the studio, which become a lovely potpourri or part of a studio project.

Lastly, I began about eight years ago with the creation of the loft, to offer each class of first graders the opportunity to make a "gift" for the next class of first graders. In addition to the "home-made wooden pieces," a few of the other gifts have been: an

alphabet frieze of two pictures for each letter made by children with crayons, chalk pastels or craypas; a mobile made from an umbrella skeleton with prisms and small mirrors hanging from it; and a mobile made from a tree branch with individual shapes of clear plastic, each with five small pieces glued on it from the studio, which represented their study of color and light throughout the year. These gifts remain in the classroom and offer traces of the history of our learning community.

By observing children interacting with the environment and each other, I've come to have a strong respect for the role of the environment in creating and supporting relationships and learning. Parents often remark, "I wish I was in first grade again. I would love to come here everyday." Creating environment is an ongoing process as Michele Zini [Co-Editor of *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children*] reminds us, "It is not a menu to be learned. You have to build the way."

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