Lella Gandini is the Reggio Children liaison in the U.S. for the dissemination of the Reggio Emilia approach. Barbara Bowman is one of the faculty founders and past president of the Erikson Institute and chief officer of Chicago Public Schools Office of Early Childhood Education. John Nimmo is a faculty member at the University of New Hampshire and executive director of the University of New Hampshire Child Study and Development Center. Teresa Acevedo is the director of Head Start for Child-Parent Centers of Tucson and the regions south of Tucson. NAREA chose the occasion of this reception to honor Lella Gandini for her work in early childhood education. Barbara, John and Teresa were asked to develop questions for Lella, relevant to her career and Lella was asked to develop questions for each of them, relevant to the context of their work with teachers, children and families.

Barbara: Lella is an old and very dear friend, so it is a great pleasure to have an opportunity to ask her a hard question. Lella, considering the importance of cultural context, I am wondering what you believe are the differences between early childhood education in Italy and the United States?

Lella: I think that more than the cultural context, the Italian political context has contributed to the differences between early childhood education in Italy and the United States. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a very strong movement at the popular level of women, students and union members, who worked hard for better social services, including early childhood education. As a result, early childhood education became a very important public commitment. In fact, 95% of three to six year-old children currently attend preschool, and most are in government-supported programs. There is an Italian governmental policy that entitles all three to six year-old children to free education. I believe that most Italian parents want their children to be with other children in a preschool program. Even where the programs are not of the highest quality, attending preschool is considered to be a child’s right. However, it is important to mention that those hard-won social services, including good early childhood education, have to be constantly protected. The center-right coalition of the government, now predominant in Italy, tends to cut social services and favor private initiatives in all fields of education. These government leaders also promise to tax cuts while the public debt is increasing. This sounds sadly familiar to the situation in the United States.

My question for you, Barbara, is connected to the idea of professional development. In Italy, those who want to become teachers attend a five year preparatory or high school, which specializes in psychology and education. Because their formal education is somewhat limited, ongoing professional development is considered to be essential for teachers in the Reggio municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. I know how much you believe in the
importance of educational and cultural preparation for early educators in the United States. In your view, which subjects or fields of knowledge should all early childhood students study during their formal education?

Barbara: If you had asked me that question 15 years ago, I would have said child development without any question at all. At one time, that was the basis of our professional knowledge. But for the last 25 years, we (at Erikson Institute) have become increasingly sophisticated about other domains of knowledge, which we believe may be equally important. I have become increasingly suspicious of using developmental norms as a criterion for children's achievement. We know, for instance, that children are born with genetic capabilities to learn language and mathematics. But we also know that there is an enormous amount of learning that is dependent on the cultural context, in which children are raised. I think that one of the best examples is vocabulary. Children from low-income families tend to communicate perfectly well with their families but they very often do not have vocabularies that are sufficiently robust to support school learning. So they are developmentally competent but they still may very likely fail in school. Thus we have a dichotomy between what we would consider child development and opportunities for children to learn.

The second reason I would enlarge the knowledge base for teachers has to do with the research that we have done on the importance of prior knowledge as a condition of children's future knowledge. We always knew that early childhood education greatly affected later learning. But 25-30 years ago, we did not really appreciate the importance of the platform, on which you build later knowledge. Children must have the opportunity to develop a platform of conceptual knowledge, on which specific information rests.

I used to think that early childhood education was interdisciplinary, so it wasn't terribly important for early education students to study the different disciplines. But I have become increasingly convinced that discipline knowledge is essential for teachers, so that they more fully understand the field of knowledge that they are preparing the children to learn. Once I was observing in a classroom where the teacher was showing the number line to the children and I asked her, "Why are you teaching the children about the number line?" After a pause, she replied, "Because that's what I was taught to do." I wondered how the children would be able to understand the importance of the number line if the teacher doesn't. So I believe that preschool teachers must have much deeper discipline knowledge, which is one of the reasons why I support early childhood teachers earning BA degrees.

John: It is a great privilege to be here with Lella, whom I met 16 years ago in 1988 at the University of Massachusetts. We were both doctoral students and Carolyn Edwards was our advisor. During that time, "The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit was at the University of Massachusetts. I also traveled with Lella and Carolyn to Reggio and Pistoia in 1990. It was truly an earth-shattering time for me. I have found Lella to be a woman with great wisdom, calm and grace.
My question for Lella developed during the time that led up to the November presidential election. Lella, thinking about the potential for change in this country, what are your thoughts and dreams about the role of early childhood education in fostering a democratic society? What is your thinking about how young children can participate in meaningful ways in the life of the surrounding community?

Lella: I am very interested in the idea that children are part of their community and can take an active role in it. This is partially because I grew up in Italy. But I am sure my active interest is primarily the result of working with early childhood educators in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia and other progressive cities in Italy. These communities are truly dedicated to bringing quality to early childhood programs and, through them, I have become more keenly aware of the meaning of participation by parents in the school and participation by the school in the community. In fact, I have found this to be a deliberate choice more than a natural tendency. It is a choice made by the educational leadership, teachers and parents . . . a choice that implies great respect for children's rights as citizens. This determination communicates to many citizens the importance of becoming involved in order to make children's participation a reality. There are a number of people here tonight who are exploring the presence of children in the community, including the educators from the University of Vermont. There, the teachers are exploring the university environment and community with infants and toddlers. They are finding that these very young children are extremely interested in their surroundings, in seeing and entering into relationships with the life outside of the Campus Children's Center. Recently, they have extended this exploration to other city landmarks. One of the ways to be constructively involved with children is by helping them to enjoy their rights as members of a community. Working with children in this way will ultimately make our society a better society. Yet this is quite difficult when the tendency is to protect and contain children, focusing only on what to teach them rather than observing and encouraging their desire to be part of everyday life.

Now I have a question for John. John accepted a new job a little more than a year ago and I’m very curious to know: What are the guiding principles and the strategies that sustain you in these two roles as professor of education and as director of a laboratory school at a university?

John: After 13 months at the University of New Hampshire, I have to say that the work at the Child Study Center is what sustains me. My work there with the children and teachers helps me to think about how to reach out to the undergraduate students, who are trying to learn about working with children in new ways. The first year has really been focused on the teachers at the Child Study Center. My guiding principles in my work with teachers and students are influenced by my guiding principles relating to children. The first concerns young children having a voice, so that they can be active participants in their community. Secondly, I believe that children must have access to meaningful, responsive and respectful early childhood education and environments.

Regarding my work with teachers, my first guiding principle concerns teachers
having a voice and having power. How can I ensure and expect that each teacher have a way to impact the vision and the culture of the center? As director, I am there to be the collector of the vision, to be the shaper of the vision and to ask the right questions at the right time. That means finding ways for teachers to become engaged in meaningful decision making, spreading out decision making to every teacher. That means making sure that staff meetings are no longer only about business but rather, about real questions that relate to children and their roles. As a director, this means trusting that teachers are capable and can make worthy decisions, even if they’re not the same decisions that I would make. On a daily and weekly basis, I watch decisions being made that aren’t the ones I would necessarily make. I see this as a strength of the center. I learned this from Karen Haigh and her work at Chicago Commons. Karen felt that if she believed in the teachers' ability to make decisions, their strengths would become visible.

Another one of my guiding principles has to do with collaboration, with setting up systems, ways and time for people to talk, to argue and to grow with each other. As a result, teachers who were quiet and reserved a year ago are now regularly contributing to discussions and decision making at the center.

Lella: Now I have a question for Teresa. When I went to Tucson, I was very impressed by the way that completely different groups of educators, who have different responsibilities and different kinds of support in the city, can work together. I’m interested in your reflections about this collaborative experience in Tucson.

Teresa: Collaboration is very complicated. When we enter into collaborations with different people, it is important to remember that people need time and space to understand one another’s perspectives. I don’t think we live in a society that encourages this type of approach. We have to expect that people in a group will have different points of view. Collaborations are very demanding of our personal and professional energy. It’s important to recognize that people are giving a great deal of themselves and they need to get something back. You have to build competency together and understand that there is knowledge together in collaboration. It is helpful to understand something about the perceptual shift that you think you’re going to have or that you want to have, as a result of the collaborative experience. Talking about these issues within the group results in a sense of reciprocal community. For us, it is vital to always be aware of our vision of ourselves, our organization, and the children and families with whom we work. These are the kinds of considerations that have allowed the Tucson collaboration to continue to live. It has been a very difficult yet very worthwhile process.

Now my question for Lella. I have known Lella for four or five years. I met her at a meeting of the Tucson Children’s Collaborative, which has been studying the Reggio philosophy for many years, and through Karen Haigh. So I am the freshman or the infant on this panel, and it has been a pleasure and a great privilege for me. Lella, since you have had such a tremendous impact on early childhood education in this country, I’m wondering: How do you imagine the work in the United States expanding in the context of the political and educational blueprint that we have received from the national government?
Lella: Thinking in terms of the work of communicating and exchanging the ideas from Reggio, I'm feeling quite optimistic, especially when I see who is here tonight at this meeting. I believe the future is here in this room with all of you. When I first came to the United States to speak about the Reggio Emilia approach many years ago, it seemed that the younger educators viewed these concepts as quite unusual. Yet the more seasoned educators recognized the influence of progressive education in the ideas developed in that small Italian city. They often told me that, historically, progressive education had not been accepted in the U.S. But now, there are so many American educators who work with these concepts. There are also textbooks about child development, which include chapters about the Reggio Emilia approach. In addition, there are many terms and phrases from Reggio that have become part of the common language of early childhood education in this country. Initially, my Italian colleagues and I were a little concerned about how the approach would be interpreted outside of Reggio. Now, we can see how each interpretation contributes to the evolution of the basic ideas, and to our own understanding and professional development. Each interpretation reflects the children and the context, in which the experience takes place. This is all evolving despite the national political environment. While there is still a lot of work to do, I feel a great deal of hope.

One of NAREA’s goals is to create opportunities for dialogue and exchange among Reggio-inspired educators throughout North America. It is the hope of the NAREA guiding board to establish the tradition of honoring the work of our colleagues during future NAREA annual meetings, and sharing perspectives through panel exchanges such as the one on November 11, 2004. We welcome your reflections on the 2004 panel exchange and will include them in future postings on the web site. Please respond to Judith Allen Kaminsky at: j_a_kaminsky@wayne.edu