

# Dissemination: Planting Seeds

BY: KARYN CALLAGHAN AND JUDY KAMINSKY

KARYN CALLAGHAN



Karyn was a professor in college and university early childhood education programs, learning with children, educators, and families for over 40 years. She founded and coordinated the Artists at the Centre project in Hamilton, Ontario, bringing artists into early learning programs. She is president of the Ontario Reggio Association, a NAREA board member, an *Innovations* consulting editor, and a co-representative of NAREA in the Reggio Children International Network. She is also the co-author of *Documenting Children’s Meaning: Engaging in Design and Creativity with Children and Families*.

JUDY KAMINSKY



For more than 20 years, Judy served as editor of *Innovations* and was, for 11 years, the NAREA exhibit project coordinator, managing *The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition in collaboration with Reggio Children and host communities during its tour of North America. She was a NAREA founding board member and supported professional development initiatives for NAREA and Wayne State University, where she worked for 17 years. She is currently the NAREA communications and exhibitions coordinator.

Sixty years ago, in 1963, the municipality of Reggio Emilia opened its first preschool, founded on the same values as the preschool in nearby Villa Cella, where still inscribed is the declaration describing the school as the place where peace-building is achieved by educating the new generations. The municipality soon developed a system of schools where children could develop skills of critical thinking and collaboration essential to rebuilding and ensuring a democratic society. Peter Moss (2014) describes early childhood centers as *agoras*, providing opportunities for learning by children and adults, places of encounter and exchange (p. 81). He includes the schools in Reggio Emilia as an example of an alternative narrative: “These are stories that are aware of the risks of early childhood education – but also believe in the possibilities of an education that might contribute towards a more democratic, caring, just, and sustainable world” (Moss, 2019, p. 16).

A 60-year anniversary has been associated with a diamond, a word that comes from the Greek word *adamas*, which means unconquerable and enduring. Many also believe that the fire in the diamond symbolizes the constant flame of love. Carla Rinaldi (2004) wrote,

For us, documentation is part of the daily life in the schools. It is one of the ways in which we create and maintain the relationships and the experiences among our colleagues and the children. We think of documentation as an act of caring, an act of love and interaction. (p. 1)

Perhaps the interweaving of emotion, intelligence, and spirit that is committed to the more caring, just, and sustainable world that Moss described has contributed to the vibrancy of the early education system in Reggio Emilia.

Less than a quarter century after that first municipal preschool opened, a few American educators, including Lilian Katz and Howard Gardner, became aware of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia. The philosophy, founded on democratic principles and a view of children as citizens with rights and creators of culture, resonated. Within a very few years, *Newsweek* had identified the preschools in Reggio Emilia as “the best in the world” (Hinkle, 1991). Interest in early years pedagogy created in Reggio exploded. Visitors arrived

with contrasting perspectives based on North American individualist values and Piagetian assumptions about the egocentrism of young children. Far from causing the American visitors to retreat, however, the process of intercultural confrontation and exchange has proved a strong stimulus for research and discussion. (Edwards et al., 1994, p. 83)

These were two cultures that viewed themselves as dedicated to democracy, yet the differences in approaches to education are clear. Still, there was and is a desire to understand and to exchange. Resonances are there from those early days: a view that relationship is key in pedagogy; a view that children learn through active and playful engagement with each other in a rich environment; high value placed on communication. North American educators could see though that there was much we could learn. Beyond the thoughtfully designed and aesthetically beautiful environments, perhaps the principles of Reggio’s pedagogy that provoked the greatest admiration and curiosity were pedagogical documentation and the view of children as capable communicators in a “hundred languages.” Conferences and study

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weeks provided opportunities for exchange, and yet the complexity and nuances of Reggio Emilia’s pedagogy and the need for translation not just of language but also of culture created challenges. Rinaldi (2006) offers a view that doubt, uncertainty, and feelings of crisis can be seen as resources, conditions for openness and listening, and requirements for creating new thinking and perspectives (pp. 183–184). It could be overwhelming. The desire to learn was great, but the learning curve was steep.

Fortunately, we had help. Key to North American educators’ growing awareness and understanding of the schools in Reggio was and continues to be Lella Gandini, trusted by Loris Malaguzzi to be his translator and the Reggio Children liaison in the U.S. for the dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach. As this title suggests, Lella has been planting seeds and cultivating growth for decades now with deep understanding of the culture and pedagogy of Reggio and also of North America. She translates more than the spoken and written language; she is also a translator of the culture, aware of the nuances and history, of the discussions that led to decisions about choices of words. Her interviews with Malaguzzi and many of the educators, *atelieristas*, and *pedagogistas* in Reggio Emilia, as well as with educators in North America and beyond who were deeply engaged with Reggio-inspired thinking and practice, provide a timeless record of the creativity, experimentation, critical reflection, and co-construction of knowledge

that have been hallmarks of this pedagogy. In addition, her own articles and the many books she has edited and co-authored are foundational for students of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Lella’s relationship with *Innovations* as an associate editor for many years helped to form its identity as a journal that crossed borders, with articles from educators in Reggio Emilia and North America and beyond that offer a dialogue between the contexts. Lella has been the “heart and soul” of *Innovations* since its creation in 1992 in collaboration with Loris Malaguzzi. Her abiding inspiration and support have contributed substantially to the strong and positive growth and evolution of this vital resource for Reggio-inspired educators. Judy reflects on her experience as editor of *Innovations*, working closely with Lella, who was the associate editor:

The first time that I met Lella was in July 1995 at a conference in connection with the presence of *The Hundred Languages of Children – Narrative of the Possible* exhibition at Rosary College, near Chicago. I had been the managing editor of *Innovations* for two months. The conference speakers were Carlina Rinaldi, Giovanni Piazza, Amelia

Gambetti, and Lella Gandini. I was asked to interview Giovanni inside the exhibition space, and Lella decided to accompany us. The questions I had prepared focused on Giovanni’s background as an architect and his current role as an *atelierista* at La Villetta school. Giovanni graciously managed to not respond to any of my questions, while Lella thoughtfully elicited Giovanni’s perspective about the research of the children and teachers documented in the exhibition.

Thus began a long collaboration with Lella and many years of learning from her gentle and respectful guidance, generosity, knowledge, experience, listening, and relationships. In addition to her long-term support in the planning, writing, and editing of every issue in collaboration with the editorial board, Lella contributed articles and interviews with Reggio educators from the very first issue published in 1992. Wherever she went, during visits to Reggio-inspired schools in North America, she recommended *Innovations* as a resource for the educators’ professional development and asked teachers to contribute articles for publication.

We began doing interviews together in 2004, beginning with the educators who worked with REMIDA, The Creative Recycling Center in Reggio Emilia. It was an honor and a privilege to participate in these interviews. The educators from Reggio Emilia loved and respected Lella and were more than happy to share their work with us. My role was as documenter, sharing my point of view and offering direction in the conversation from time to time. In 2007, Lella was invited to participate in the Reggio Children International Network meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, and asked me to join her. This experience resulted in interviews with and articles by educators from Denmark, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Korea, and Latin America.

Through her tireless efforts and enthusiasm, Lella has left her mark on *Innovations*, NAREA, and Reggio-inspired educators and schools throughout North America and beyond. I am so grateful to her for everything she has taught me about childhood, education, and life.

It seems fitting that we use this occasion as an opportunity both to reflect and to project with Lella, not just because it’s the anniversary of the first municipal preschool and of *Innovations* (30th), NAREA (20th), and Lella’s participation on the NAREA Board (10th). It is also because the relevance of education based on democratic values is so timely. The pedagogy developed in Reggio Emilia is enduring: a pedagogy of relationship, a pedagogy of listening that makes learning visible through documentation, a democratic pedagogy that thrives on welcoming different perspectives and complexity. It is not nostalgia that draws us to revisit the foundations, but rather intense desire to recognize the unconquerable and enduring values that underlie this pedagogy while it continues to be in vibrant dialogue with the present.

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Conversations with Lella Gandini

Lella, Karyn, and Judy had virtual conversations in February and June 2022 inspired by an article that Lella wrote in an issue of *Rechild* “The Reggio Emilia Approach: A Message of Hope for the Future” about

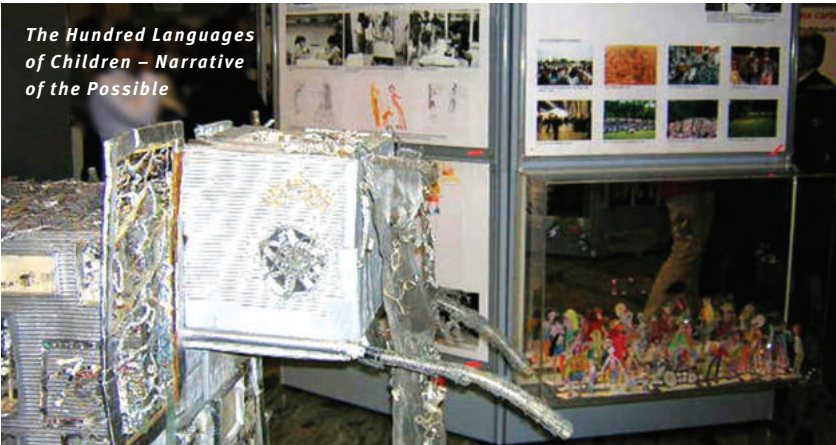
the challenges North American educators have encountered in their study of the Reggio Emilia Approach. In this article, Lella wrote,

I meet educators who come from very different teaching and life experiences; as a consequence, their expectations and their questions differ widely. Those diverse questions, however, stem ultimately from common concerns and the shared hope that quality care and education for young children will be recognized as a right for all. The message



Callaghan and Gandini at her home in Northampton, Massachusetts in 2019

Callaghan and Kaminsky at the opening of *The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition in Toronto, 2016





“The message that comes from the schools for young children of Reggio Emilia is, therefore, a message of hope for the future.

that comes from the schools for young children of Reggio Emilia is, therefore, a message of hope for the future. (Gandini, 1997, p. 6)

At the beginning of one of these conversations, Lella remarked, “One of the precious aspects of the Reggio Emilia Approach is that there are so many relationships that need to be supported and documented as much as possible without becoming overwhelmed” (personal communication, February 9, 2022). This began a discussion that integrated the value of relationships with the processes of documentation in the schools of Reggio Emilia. Later in the conversation, the non-hierarchical nature of relationships and the topic of democracy emerged. The following represents our dialogue on these essential aspects of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Relationships

The word “context” comes from the same root as the word “weaving.” Both are formed by threads that give each other strength. The contexts that are woven in the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio are embedded in a system. Although they have threads that we can consider separately, we must always bear in mind that the tight weave

is held together by listening. The publication *Indications – Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia* identifies listening as one of the principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach, as “an ongoing process that nurtures reflection, welcoming, and openness towards oneself and others; it is an indispensable condition for dialogue and change” (Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, p. 11). This integral value contributes to the complexity and richness of relationships in the Reggio Emilia municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. During our conversation, Lella offered, Teachers are always essential, in my view, in the Reggio Emilia Approach, because the teachers are the ones who listen to the children and discuss with one another what to support and document among the relations the children are forming so that the other teachers and the parents can also see and participate. (personal communication, February 9, 2022)

In her chapter in a foundational book that Lella co-edited, Lilian Katz (1998) wrote that in Reggio Emilia, “adults’ and children’s minds meet on matters of interest to both of them.” She elaborated on the benefits of this kind of relationship:

The first is that children’s minds are engaged in challenging work, including, for example, discussing their intentions, making decisions about what to represent, how to represent it, how to coordinate the efforts and resolve conflicting views of the various contributors to the project, and so forth. Second, because the teachers and the children’s minds meet on matters of real interest to both, teachers’ minds are also engaged. They seem intent on listening closely to the children’s suggestions and questions, probing their thinking, making suggestions, and encouraging children to respond to each other’s ideas. (pp. 36–37)

Lella believes that the relationship among adults in the Reggio Emilia infant-toddler centers and preschools is also key and that the one between teachers is particularly delicate, because it can be difficult to feel cooperative. There are differences in teachers’ personalities and ways of working. But regardless of the challenges, the teachers have learned to work together and make choices through collaboration and dialogue, to be respectful while not shying away from intense discussion. The nature of the adults’ and children’s relationships gives tremendous strength to the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Embracing diverse perspectives is built into the context of the pedagogy created in Reggio Emilia. The educators do not all come from a similar background in education. The intentional decision to include *atelieristas* ensures breadth. During one of her presentations at The 14th NAREA Summer Conference, Tiziana Filippini (2018) said that her background was in psychology and then asked, “Can you imagine how much I learned from the *atelieristas*?” Karyn recalled thinking that this was a beautiful example of the deep respect for what everyone brings to the relationships among the educators and staff of the Reggio schools. A diversity of ideas and challenges to another’s thinking

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are welcomed and encouraged to promote richer shared understandings. Passionately held ideas are regularly exchanged within relationships founded on the enjoyment of *confronto*, of sharing points of view. Tiziana said, If someone had witnessed one of our normal meetings, they might be surprised by

how we ‘warm up’ during the discussion. We are not afraid of disagreement and may get so passionate about a point that we raise our voices.” During a particularly intense discussion in one meeting, one of Tiziana’s colleagues remarked playfully as the conversation became intense, “I don’t think the people standing out at the bus stop need to know your opinion about this. (personal communication, April 20, 2021)

In relationships where there is affection, respect, humor, and seriousness and intensity, the educators accept responsibility for everyone’s learning, helping each other to resist succumbing to stereotypes or predictability. For us, perhaps this is a provocation to redefine what it means to collaborate—to labor together—with shared intention to lift our thinking, to see a challenging question as a gift and not an insult. This sensibility is woven into the children’s experience, too, as they strive together to overcome challenges in the gap between ideas and the physical world. According to Malaguzzi, Relationship is the primary connecting dimension of our system . . . understood not merely as a warm, protective envelope but rather as a dynamic conjunction of forces and elements interacting toward a common purpose. The strength in our system lies in the way we make explicit and then intensify the necessary conditions for

relations and interaction. We seek to support those social exchanges that better ensure the flow of expectations, conflicts, cooperation, choices, and the explicit unfolding of problems tied to the cognitive, affective, and expressive realms. (Gandini, 2012, p. 45)

The context of relationship extends beyond the interpersonal. In addition to relationships with adults and peers, children also form relationships with the environment, with beauty, and with materials. Veia Vecchi (2010) wrote, An intensity of relationship is perhaps the first, significant, instinctive way of approaching things suggested by the world of art, but it also suggests acts of intention and care towards the things we do and distances us from . . . indifference which is one of the worst ways of learning. (p. 31)

Lella shared that teachers in Reggio Emilia “organize the space in such a way that children can discover possibilities of learning through the materials that are available, in their relationships with one another, and the organization by the teachers of those relationships” (personal communication, February 9, 2022).

In our conversation with Lella, we discussed the importance of supporting children’s respectful relationship with our planet and with other living things. Karyn offered, I see sprinkled throughout your [Lella’s] writing and the writings of educators from Reggio

Emilia that relationship is central but not just the relationship among people. It's become much more urgent to recognize the importance of supporting children's relationship with our planet, with other living things, with trees and animals and rocks and water and air. Without that strong relationship, I don't know how children would grow up caring the way we need to care. We need to care better than we've been caring for our planet. (personal communication, February 9, 2022)

Lella responded that the wider world wasn't the initial focus of the Reggio educators, because it was first necessary to create a structure of support for participation through the strong intentions of the teachers, parents, and families. Yet she is interested in seeing that this broader sensibility, which Malaguzzi expressed decades ago, is strongly evident in the work of the children and educators.

Documentation

We believe that the intention to invite the participation that Lella mentioned intensifies the quality of listening that is evident in the documentation, which is created collaboratively, considering perspectives of staff, children, and families. During our conversation, Lella said, "There is a delicate balance of listening to one another, listening to children, documenting visually, revising, reviewing documentation collected, and making decisions on how to continue"

(personal communication, February 9, 2022). Laura Rubizzi, in a conversation with Lella, described the strategies to communicate learning processes as being "a very open area of research." She continued,

The further we go on, the more we understand that many levels of documentation are possible: basic documentation, with keywords, gives a certain type of information. But to articulate the communication, one must enter inside the processes of learning, getting to know the tools that the teacher uses, reading the discussions of the children, seeing the growth paths that the children follow. Every time teachers evaluate themselves through revisiting the documentation, they learn something more than what they had learned with the children. (Gandini, 2005, p. 61)

Documentation has been described as a process for making pedagogical (or other) work visible and subject to interpretation, dialogue, confrontation (argumentation) and understanding. . . . making perspectives and interpretations explicit and contestable through documenting in relationship with others . . . [fostering] a conflict of ideas and argumentation, not a cosy search for consensus . . . [when] the subject must take responsibility for her or his point of view. (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, pp. 15–16)

Relationship and documentation are tightly interwoven in the

Reggio Emilia educational project. The quality of the relationship is built day by day, defined by respect for the intelligence of all protagonists and curiosity about the networks of connection that bind us in a culture of care for all our relations—people, trees, rocks, sounds, water, air. A project that was shared with the entire community just before the pandemic, "Imagine a Forest" (*Immagina un Bosco*"), illustrated the children's questions and recognition of the complexity of these relations. The people of Reggio Emilia have ongoing opportunities to encounter the thinking of their youngest citizens. Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological framework depicts just such a network. If we hold this in mind, we can document with different questions guiding us and make meaning and relaunch from what we have documented with far greater richness than if we are seeking merely to catalogue children's skills. Lella explains, Educators examine ways to understand the implications and layers of possibilities that documentation offers toward constructing support for teachers. They realize that the process of documentation gives new insight and extra tools for gaining fruitful and satisfying learning experiences for children and teachers. They also see clear evidence of how documentation motivates parents and families to become more willing participants in the life of the centers or schools. (Gandini, 2001, p. 16)

In the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, the processes of documentation are deeply ingrained in the daily life of the children and adults. The creativity, the uncertainty, and the democratic principles are not just the content of what they're teaching children. The teachers are living the same processes of thinking and learning that are central to the pedagogy.

In our conversation, Lella also said, Documentation became something to study and to use for taking the next step in each classroom in each school and then read with the parents. It was really the brick-by-brick way to build the approach. Through documenting what the children were saying and doing and sharing it with parents, the teachers gained an appreciation for what the children themselves were contributing to the formation of this approach. (personal communication, February 9, 2022)

The work we have seen in the exhibitions from Reggio Emilia is compelling evidence of what can happen when children are immersed in educational contexts that seek their ideas and value exchange and where they engage in research together with educators. This pedagogical practice keeps the work in Reggio schools tightly connected to the lived experience of children, to research, and to philosophy.



Democracy

The educators in Reggio Emilia refer to transversal values and practices that are woven into all aspects of their pedagogy. Although we are addressing three of them separately, they are intimately interconnected. So often, the children in the preschools in Reggio Emilia begin their comments with the phrase "in my opinion." This signals a recognition, perhaps unexpected in young children but maybe not all that common even in adults, that our knowledge is partial and that other opinions can give us more complete understanding. This is how the children see the adults relating to each other and to the children. And the teachers often follow up with a question to the group: "Do you agree? Do you have a different idea?" We also see that the protagonists who engage in thinking together include all the staff—the educators, the cooks, the families, and others from the broader community. It is an approach that invites theories and co-construction of knowledge. Perhaps it is also an indication of deeply held values that are fundamentally democratic.

During our conversation, Karyn said, I've been thinking about how particularly relevant the strong focus on democracy is right now. Reggio's work emerged after WWII as a response to fascism. When I look at what's happening in our world right now, I think those messages about democracy are urgent. It's urgent that we recognize how important it is for children to have a lived experience of respect for others, recognition of other points of view, and for dialogue. Part of what strikes me is that the organization of the schools in Reggio is not hierarchical. There are different roles, but all are valued, and I think children see that as well. (personal communication, February 9, 2022)

The kind of democracy we see in Reggio Emilia includes children as citizens with rights, whose thinking is valued. We seldom see the sensibility in our contexts that children can influence public policy. However, there are examples in North America where documentation of children in programs that embrace a pedagogy of listening and the image of the child that is central to the Reggio Emilia Approach have influenced government documents of pedagogy for early years (e.g., Ontario's *How Does Learning Happen?*, 2014; British Columbia's *Early Learning Framework*, 2019). It can make a significant difference when we engage policymakers with the compelling evidence of children's intelligence and empathy and the importance of early years pedagogy based on the foundational views and practices we have learned from Reggio Emilia.

In a conversation with Lella prior to the Ontario Reggio Association's first study week in Reggio in 2011, she made a quiet suggestion to Karyn, essentially planting a seed: "You should take people with you who could help with this work" (personal communication, January 19, 2011). Karyn



realized that they had been so focused on organizing the logistical details and preparing participants for the experience, they had not been thinking politically. Immediately, she extended an invitation to the newly formed Early Years Division of the Ontario Ministry of Education to have two people on their team join the group for the study week. The impact was profound, and subsequent policy documents show the influence of that first-hand experience, seeing a community that views children as citizens who contribute to the culture, whose voices are heard.

Malaguzzi’s initial sensibility was to take the children into the *piazza* to engage the community. He had confidence that if the children were recognized as creators of culture, these encounters would strengthen the community. Perhaps we can find the confidence to carry this idea of dissemination further, to invite the broader community, including policymakers, into dialogue about the kind of citizen and the kind of planet we desire. Challenging the status quo and engaging in critical reflection rather than conforming and complying are strategies that would better prepare us to build a stronger democracy. In *Rechild*, Lella writes, “Teachers who want to begin changing things realize that to work together means having to call everything into question, a situation which, to say the least, can be unsettling” (Gandini, 1997, p. 6).

Planting Seeds of Hope for a Better World

In May 1993, the municipal early childhood services of Reggio Emilia were awarded the Kohl International Teaching Award in Chicago, Illinois. In his speech on this occasion, Malaguzzi (2016) said that children and adults alike need a quiet place where they can think more and better. He then elaborated,

We will think about what we have done and what we have not done, for us and for the children, we will also try to understand the reasons why an experience of this kind not only lies behind us, but is also before us. (p. 423)

Malaguzzi ended his speech with these now-cherished thoughts about the relationship between nostalgia and hope:

Perhaps more than a nostalgia for the past we need nostalgia for the future. Children, the children that are and the children to come, are waiting for us there in the place where nostalgia for the future is capable of arriving, and let us all hope we are there too. (p. 423)

Circling back to the inscription on the first preschool in Villa Cella describing the school as the place where peace building is achieved by educating the new generations, how might we describe our schools in these times? What is our nostalgia for the future? Which relationships are essential for our planet? How will we know that we are actually contributing to the vision we hold for our children? Years later, reflecting on the strong resolve of the parents who built that school, Malaguzzi (2018) said,

And it remained an uninterrupted lesson given by men and women whose ideals were still intact, who had understood long before I had that history can be changed, and is changed by taking possession of it, starting with the destiny of the children. (p. 25)

Dahlberg and Moss (2006) wrote about the educators of Reggio Emilia offering hope to communities who are prepared “to combine utopian thought and action, to dream about the future, to hope for a better world” (p. 21). Lella has continued to plant the seeds of this hope, and we will be forever indebted to her for her gentle, optimistic way of listening. Her kindness, interest, and openheartedness have touched all those she has met and offered an ongoing source of renewal for our work with children and families.

In an effort to include a multiplicity of voices in our dialogue with Lella and our desire to always stay close to the voices of children and educators, we offer the following reflections by North American educators who have shared experiences in professional development with her.



T E R E S A  
A C E V E D O

Teresa Acevedo, early childhood education consultant, executive director and co-founder of Tucson Children’s Project, former children’s services director for Child-Parent Centers, Inc., Tucson, Arizona, and former NAREA Board member

Established on *Tohono O’odham* ancestral land, Tucson is the largest city in Southern Arizona. The closest Mexican border lies one hour away. In a few border-located schools, the Arizona-Mexico wall, commonly referred to by children as the fence or the *linea*, can be viewed from their playgrounds. The local Head Start’s federal grantee serves over 2000 children through infant, toddler, home-based, and preschool education programs in a five-county region. Tucson Children’s Project was founded in 1998 for the purpose of cultivating support for public, federal, and private schools as well as community agencies who were interested in studying the philosophical/educational principles of the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

During the winter of 2001, Tucson Children’s Project and Head Start Child-Parent Centers, in collaboration with multiple schools and educational agencies in the Tucson community, hosted Lella Gandini as our guest educator. Three hundred educators filled the evening venue for her highly anticipated presentation. Lella instilled a new vision in the minds of the audience. That event launched a 20-year collegial relationship of professional development on the principles of the Reggio Emilia educational project. Each of Lella’s subsequent visits encouraged educators to think beyond the conformity entrenched by commercialized learning trends for early childhood education.

Lella introduced us to Loris Malaguzzi’s “The Hundred Languages of Children” metaphoric poem which offered a fresh view for seeing and knowing the



competent child, their life experiences, and their joys for learning, giving time for their own discoveries. Lella’s ease of holding each person’s thoughts, stories, and ideas in reverence served as a catalyst for change.

Sparking both enthusiasm and perplexity in her audience, Lella spoke to the early childhood educators about the image of the child and the rights of children, parents, and teachers. She said that one’s own image of the child reflects the type of interaction and relationship that is formed with a child or parent. Children are born with a sense of exploration and research. The way children respond to the power of materials attunes their thinking and learning. Using children’s documented drawings, constructions, and studies illustrates how children’s thinking is revealed. An information-only learning approach must be lifted into a wonder-centric, imaginative, creative approach. It was the time of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top policies in education promoted by commercial curricula using assessment for the purpose of continued funding. These notions competed with the educational movement that had turned a deficit-driven eye toward children’s own thinking, creative play, and experiences.

Lella’s presence and gentleness toward humanity propelled the early learning profession to open their minds. Bringing a fresh lens, she dignified the presence of every person with grace and empathy for the self, child, and family. She presented learning through one’s current experiences, values, beliefs, and culture, opening the way for a potential paradigm shift for change, an alternative to the entrenched approach



of teaching children and families. With a fiercely quiet intellect, she radiated energy that invited a shift in educational stances and perception. Lella profoundly altered a way of thinking for those open to learning another way of being. Tendencies for viewing family and community diversity as a challenge in the changing world were reframed from stances of difference to the potential to see and use the richness of the child, the family, and community life as a way of unifying rather than separating learning.

The expansion of the Reggio Emilia philosophy and tenets continue to thrive in various Southern Arizona schools and classrooms. We thank Lella for offering an extraordinary privilege to our learning communities and pollinating our collective minds. She is a brilliant scholar, author, educator, and treasured friend to many. Lella is an illuminator of the image of the child and a beacon for the rights of children, families, and educators that enables them to learn in spaces of creativity and well-being with the view of the child as the central protagonist of her or his own rich experiences. *Gracias, Lella, for adding even more light to our Sonoran Desert, con gran cariño.*



Gandini with University of Arizona educators in 2018



AMBER  
LOWE

Amber Lowe, president of BARIN and chief of staff of The Advent School, Boston, Massachusetts

Lella Gandini has been a key supporter, partner, collaborator, and champion of the Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network (BARIN) over the years. She has been so generous with her time, and we are so fortunate to have Lella in our community. She has been a frequent speaker at BARIN events over the years, including:

- “Exploring the Reggio Emilia Approach to Education,” December 6, 2012/April 26, 2013
- “Creating Reggio-Inspired Environments,” March 20, 2014
- “Thoughts about Literacy Learning from Reggio Emilia,” April 30, 2015
- “How Do We Curate our Photos and Notes and Decide What to Share?” with Melissa Rivard, Harvard Project Zero, April 28, 2016
- “The Enchantment of Writing: BARIN Workshop Series” with educators from Newtowne School, April 2018
- “Dialogues from Reggio Emilia to New England” with George Forman during *The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition hosting period in Boston, August 2018
- 2019 BARIN Conference, “What ALL Children Deserve: Dialogue on the Rights of Children,” August 27, 2019

During the 2019 BARIN Conference, Lella shared, “We need to listen to children, listen to their expressions, their feelings, their behavior, their choices.” The BARIN Board is so grateful for all of Lella’s support, guidance, and championship over the years. We would not be the organization we are today without Lella Gandini!



STEPHANIE  
COX  
SUÁREZ

Stephanie Cox Suárez, BARIN Board member, Documentation Studio founder, and clinical associate professor emerita at Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, Boston, Massachusetts

Since its inception in 2008, Lella Gandini has been a strong supporter of the Documentation Studio at Wheelock College. She graced Documentation Studio events many times, and when she could not attend an Open Studio, she sent her appreciation for the work and her best wishes. Lella is a collaborator and mentor across so many New England venues, colleges, schools, and programs. Her carefully crafted and thoughtful messages about the Reggio Emilia Approach are delivered with grace and love. She has made an enormous impact on educators at all levels of experience. Thank you, Lella.



HILARY  
ODOY

Hilary Odo, BARIN Board member, current director of Radcliffe Child Care Center, and former director of Newtowne School, Cambridge, Massachusetts

In April 2018, when Boston was preparing to welcome *The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition, Lella offered to present with the teachers of Newtowne School on the enchantment of writing to encourage conversations about one of the exhibition’s sections. In preparation for presenting alongside us, Lella decided to spend a few hours with our program one morning. She made me promise her that she would only be introduced to the children as “grandmother.” She delighted in the children and fit right in as a quietly celebrated new friend of our family cooperative community. Lella was welcomed by the children as if she’d known them all along.



LEFT Gandini in Boston during exhibition hosting period

RIGHT Gandini at Newtowne School in 2018



For our session with the educators, we staged a wide array of mark-making materials for teachers to create with, and Lella was quite playful alongside the teachers. After presenting with our team about the enchantment of mark-making, she offered this treasured message:

You constructed an evening with so many possibilities for learning by the participant, every detail of the setup presented an opportunity for creating something new by the teachers and with the children and was so beautifully displayed. Your way of including the voice, thoughts, and interpretations with images, stories of creativity, and learning offered proof of the attentive way that you support them in their everyday growth! (personal communication, April 2018)

Lella left such a mark on our program and in the hearts of our children and our teachers during this treasured opportunity for collaboration. *Grazie, Lella!*



ANGELA  
FERRARIO

Angela Ferrario, BARIN Board member, U.S. liaison for Reggio study groups, and founder of International Study Tours

I had the pleasure of working with Lella Gandini and Mary Mindess when we initiated the Spring Reggio Emilia Institute at Lesley University in April 1993. It continued annually for over 20 years with Lella’s presence along with invited speakers from Reggio Emilia and the United States. When the Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network was formed, and we began offering professional development for educators, Lella’s participation and consistent availability and support guided us. Whatever BARIN organizes, she is automatically invited as our special guest. Lella’s gentle way of sharing knowledge with a wide range of audiences remains an invaluable treasure, and BARIN has been so fortunate to have her as our esteemed partner.



KATY  
DONOVAN

Katy Donovan, BARIN board member and executive director of Campus Child Care, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

In 2013, we had the amazing opportunity to have Lella visit one of our centers, Peabody Terrace Children’s Center (PTCC). She walked around to see our classrooms and then provided us time to be in conversation with her. Lella authentically engaged with children as they showed her their classrooms. After she saw the school and insisted on seeing every classroom, we gathered some teachers for a question and answer session. I remember the feeling of sitting at that table, of being with a renowned educator in our field. Every teacher who was able to attend our tea and cookie session was literally on the edge of their seat, hanging on her every word.

We were so excited to have Lella visit and were so proud of what we were doing. Looking at the photos almost 10 years later, I realize again how gentle she was with us, how much more work we have to do, and how affirming and confirming she was about our work.



Gandini at PTCC in 2013



Gandini and PTCC child



Gandini at PTCC in 2013





CATHERINE  
HANT

Catherine Hant, principal, Junior School, The Bishop Strachan School (BSS), Toronto, Ontario

The collaboration between Lella Gandini and The Bishop Strachan School (BSS) began in 2005, almost 20 years ago. This relationship was formed under the leadership and initiative of Jennifer Armstrong, who was the principal of the Junior School at that time and the co-founding president of the Ontario Reggio Association. Our early partnership with Lella then led to connections with Amelia Gambetti, Reggio Children, and NAREA. These foundational relationships, along with Lella’s and Amelia’s support, climaxed with the hosting of *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition in January 2007.

From this moment onward, our relationship with Lella became pivotal to our development as a Reggio-inspired school. With her guidance, we learned that with all of its complexity and beauty, this approach honors the rights of children and is not defined by curriculum. Rather, it’s a way of being and existing in a deeply connected relationship with the world around us. At BSS, we have been greatly inspired by the educational projects and founding principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach and work to create contexts and experiences that equally honor the rights of children within our unique North American context and with Lella’s mentorship.

Over many years, Lella has visited BSS on multiple occasions. Kerry Embrey, grade 6 teacher, shared, “We looked forward to her yearly visits when she would gently, yet keenly, prompt us

to consider her provocations and queries about our spaces and the ways we chose to make visible our processes of teaching and learning. She always delighted in interactions with the children during her tours, and it was obvious by their enthusiastic dialogue that they sensed a kindred spirit who appreciated their creativity, curiosity, and desire for joy. (personal communication, November 14, 2022)

One of our *atelieristas* and lead teachers, Shelley van Benschop, reflected,

Whenever we had the privilege of welcoming Lella into our school and into our classrooms, I was always nervous in the beginning. I worried if we had “done enough,” if we had honoured and respected the beautiful and thoughtful learnings from Reggio Emilia.

At the same time, I was excited as I knew that it was a generous gift to have her with us and an opportunity to listen and grow. Lella always met us with graciousness and generosity. She asked us questions that helped us look with clarity again at something we thought we knew or had discovered. One strong memory was when Lella and Amelia came for the first time, perhaps in 2006, and spent time in our Senior Kindergarten classroom. A group of children were creating crowns with wire, bits of paper, glass, and found objects from nature. Lella held my hand warmly and said, “*Bella*, so beautiful; look at how joyful they are.” (personal communication, September 15, 2022)

In the almost 20 years since that visit, it is amazing to reflect on how far we have come in our learning, thinking, and dialogue as a community and how our pedagogical actions continue to shift and evolve. So much of that growth has been inspired and supported by Lella.

In addition to these critical visits when she was immersed in our environment and worked alongside our faculty and community, Lella also collaborated with us to support our annual summer symposium. This is a conference for local, national, and international educators that is hosted at our school every July. During this time, we share our pedagogical philosophy, an alternative to Western conceptions of what education is and who it is for. It offers a fundamentally different way of thinking about and valuing children and educational spaces within our society.

At BSS, investigations involve deep explorations into interconnected topics and extend throughout much of our work with the children. It continues to be important to us to engage in dialogue with other educators and to learn from their perspectives and experience. During our July 2021 virtual conference, Lella and Cathy Weisman Topal were invited to be our keynote speakers. This was a wonderful way to highlight their new book *Beautiful Stuff From Nature*, in which one of the chapters documents “An Island Beach Experience” with our Senior Kindergarten students and teachers.

On behalf of BSS, I would like to express our immense appreciation and gratitude for Lella. Her wisdom, her kindness, and her generosity have been invaluable to us during our journey. She has encouraged, challenged, and filled us with hope. Lella has forever impacted our practice as teachers, our culture as a school community, and our belief in our children and ourselves. *Grazie mille* and *tanto amore*, Lella!



Kerri Embrey and Shelley van Benschop with Gandini during a visit to BSS Junior School

Her wisdom, her kindness, and her generosity have been invaluable to us during our journey.



KAREN  
HAIGH

Karen Haigh, early childhood education consultant, former program director for Chicago Commons, and associate professor of early childhood education at Columbia College, Chicago, Illinois

In 1995, Lella Gandini first began visiting Chicago Commons, a social service agency providing Head Start, State Prekindergarten, and subsidized childcare in low-income areas of Chicago. Though she originally spent a great deal of time working with Chicago Commons, she also devoted a lot of time working with various schools, programs, and organizations in the Chicago area, including the Chicago Public Schools, Columbia College Chicago, Winnetka Public Schools, and Crossroads for Learning. She worked directly with some programs by observing and meeting with groups of educators and also worked with programs to provide presentations for large groups of educators and parents in the Chicago area.

In the Chicago area, Reggio-inspired consultants worked on sharing strategies, asking challenging questions, and giving advice in an atmosphere of exchange when listening and dialogue were valued. Lella clearly provided extraordinary support while asking thought-provoking questions or giving advice or suggestions when she met with groups





Gandini and Haigh at Crossroads for Learning meeting

of educators or administrators. There were times when she made a slight suggestion that had a major impact on programs. For example, while at Commons, she suggested making a summary of the year’s professional development experiences. As a result, I developed an annual report that included internal and external professional development experiences, presentations developed and given by staff, and major changes that impacted the overall program. These annual reports became invaluable and were shared with Commons’ upper administration, the board of directors, and private and government funders. Additionally, our staff realized how much had been done and how the quality of our professional development had substantially advanced. Lella has the knack of offering a sliver of an idea that has the potential to develop into a major program change or evolution.

Other times, Lella gave advice that was clear and direct, and when we reflected and acted upon her advice or suggestions, it positively impacted programs. For example, after observing a site with a focus on the environment, she made suggestions for entranceways and displays: Make families feel welcome when they enter the school. Offer an invitation to come in; include pleasant aspects, such as plants and documentation panels. Share information about the people who work there, including descriptions of who they are. Give visibility to the philosophy of the school. Share an invitation to learn more. For classrooms, Lella suggested: Use subtle, soft colors for walls and backgrounds. Remember the children bring the color to the classroom, so you don’t have to add colors. Children’s work also brings color to the classroom. Remove scalloped framing. Space should encourage children to work in small groups.



Gandini and Vanessa Rich, former deputy commissioner, City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services

While meeting with staff from Chicago Commons, Lella talked about gathering memories, thoughts, and desires as a way to begin with children. This is just one example of the simplicity and complexity of her advice and suggestions. Needless to say, Lella’s most thoughtful, respectful, and caring interactions have had a huge impact on the Chicago area’s children, educators, parents, and administrators. For me personally, she has been enlightening and an inspiration and offered the impetus to keep on keeping on.



K E L S E Y  
V A S Q U E Z



S A B R I N A  
B A L L



M E L A N I E  
A K I N S

Kelsey Vasquez, director of educational practices, Sabrina Ball, director, and Melanie Akins, *atelierista*, Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool, Scottsdale, Arizona

Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool is located in Scottsdale, Arizona and currently serves 140 children, ages 18 months to 5 years, from 125 families. Established in 1995, Pinnacle is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and has been committed to studying the work of educators from Reggio Emilia, Italy, since visiting *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibit at Mills College in 1998.

Over the years, this traveling exhibition has been transformative for the educators of our school. Sabrina Ball first saw Lella Gandini speak at *L’Atelier* in Miami when *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition was displayed in 2005. This chance encounter planted a seed of aspiration that collaboration with Lella was possible for our school, a hope that was fulfilled just a few years later.

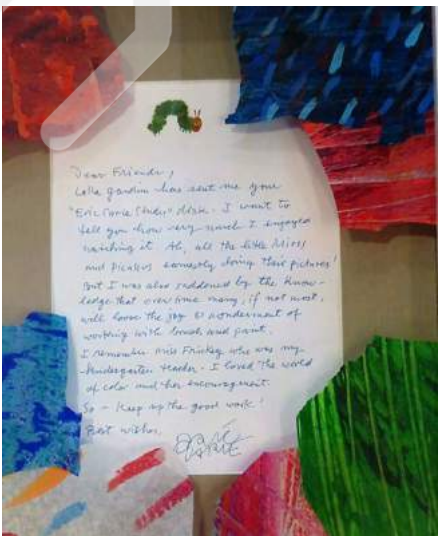
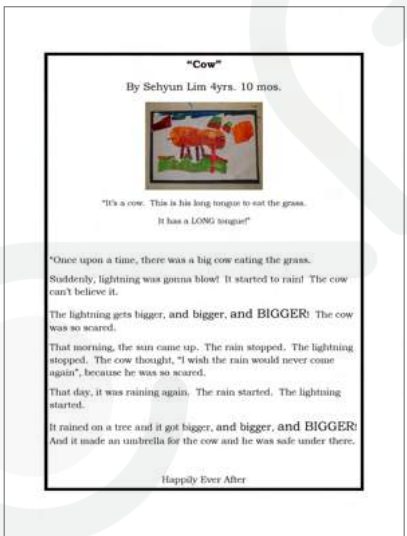
There have been countless moments with Lella that have left a lasting impact, but often it is her words that remain with us: “Precious, interesting things should always be around children” (personal communication, February 2009). Lella enriched our staff with her visits, sharing intriguing videos, images, and documentation with thoughtful insights. Perhaps most impactful was the genuine care and interest she had in our students and staff. On one special occasion, Lella was introduced to a child named Layla, and they giggled over the shared name. The following year, joy was evident on both faces as they reunited.

In 2013, we organized a conference focused on early literacy and proudly shared with Lella a yearlong study that highlighted the children’s fondness for the inspired art of Eric Carle. We gifted Lella a booklet and disk that documented our journey with a strong emphasis on the process that Lella had encouraged. Lella responded to our gift, “Let me share this with my friend, Mr. Eric Carle.” He was a celebrated author and illustrator to us but a dear friend to Lella. To our surprise and delight, we received a personalized letter back from Mr. Carle, an endearing keepsake for us to treasure.

Lella inspired the genesis of our early childhood conference every other year to engage in dialogue on alternative pedagogy. As the keynote speaker, she reached a new audience of Arizona teachers and administrators not yet familiar with the work of educators in Reggio Emilia. Lella offered tenderness as she provoked new understandings, prompting us to articulate our perspectives and consider our own voices as educators in our documentation. Her guidance supported a shift in thinking about our context as we embraced the Sonoran Desert we live within, encouraging us to contribute to publications such as *Beautiful Stuff from Nature* that explore our sense of place. Her wisdom and insight are a legacy for many educators.



Lella began making annual visits to our program in the spring of 2009, offering a decade of inspiration and gentle encouragement that pushed the boundaries of our thinking and questioned the status quo regarding what is believed to be possible in early childhood education in Arizona. In a conversation with Lella in her first year, Melanie Akins shared how uncertain she felt at times about the course of a study. Lella encouraged us: “It is good not to be too sure because then you can continue to explore and learn” (personal communication, March 2013). She always brought our focus back to the role of educator as researcher, continuously learning about and alongside the children in our care. Lella cultivated a sense of confidence with uncertainty within us, pushing the boundaries of traditional approaches to education.



Gandini with educators and children

Eric Carle Cow Story and Letter from Eric Carle



Gandini and Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool educators

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