



Pablo Neruda School, Reggio Emilia, Italy.  
Children sculpting their teacher's head while atelierista, Mara Davoli, documents their work.

— *Photo by Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, 1992*

## **SEEING YOUNG CHILDREN WITH NEW EYES:**

*What we've learned from Reggio Emilia about children and ourselves*

*Sydney Gurewitz Clemens  
& Leslie Gleim  
with Jed Handler*

Note: Children's names have been changed for privacy, except where permission has been granted.

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*Our goal is to build an amiable school where children, teachers,  
and families feel at home. Such a school requires careful thinking  
and planning concerning procedures, motivations, and interests.*

— Dr. Loris Malaguzzi

Dr. Malaguzzi was the educational thinker who guided and inspired the Reggio Emilia schools from their birth in 1945 until his death in 1994.

## Preface

*Imagination  
is what enables us to cross the empty spaces  
between ourselves and those...  
we have called 'other' over the years.*

— Maxine Greene<sup>1</sup>

This is a book for early childhood teachers who are able to imagine their teaching growing better over time, and who are willing to struggle to make what they imagine come true. It's for teachers who can imagine that offering a good learning experience to children will, in some way, help the world progress towards peace and justice, and insist that all people will be included in their goodwill.

More than two decades ago, when my Pacific Oaks colleague Dr. Elizabeth Jones handed me the Reggio Emilia video *To Make a Portrait of a Lion* and a single page of notes, I have been inspired to study more about how young children are educated in Reggio Emilia. I have learned that this is a continuing task I will embrace for the rest of my life; just as teaching practices in Reggio shift, evolve, and grow steadily.

I have come to realize that Reggio thinking depends on so many variables that each of us re-invents it in her<sup>2</sup> own way, drawing from her own cultural vocabulary and conventions, constantly revising and expanding.

Now no longer teaching children, I wanted to write a book about my discoveries along the Reggio Emilia road, and having written other books about teaching, realized combining my thoughts with those of another teacher actively practicing in the classroom would bring the reader two perspectives and two processes, providing wider, deeper, and hopefully, richer views.

Thus Leslie Gleim's involvement and the tales from her Ohio classroom and experience broaden the scope of what I provide, as her children dance through these pages. We mean for each reader to discover her own personal individual path, and not feel bound to copy either of ours. Please, make this material your own!

There is no formula for being a "Reggio teacher"! (As people in Reggio want us to remember, the only real Reggio teachers live in the city of Reggio Emilia.) We can learn ways of thinking about children from the Reggiani<sup>3</sup>, but our local communities, the children and families in our programs, must determine what and how we teach. There may be global Reggio Emilia truths, but Leslie and I hope our readers concern

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1. From Greene, M. 1995 *Release the Imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Page 3.

2. There are so many more women in our field, and "his/her" is truly awkward on the written page, thus my choice of alternating pronouns..

3. When we say "Reggiani" in this book, we mean people in the Reggio Emilia Municipal Program for young children.

themselves with expressions of those Reggio ideas which make sense of, and work effectively in their own neighborhoods!

I hope your journey will be as wonderful an adventure as you can imagine! Mine continues to thrill me.

Like you, Leslie and I have spent our lives thus far trying to teach as well as we can, and we've learned some things along the way. We wrote this book to share what we've learned with you. Our development, as we studied the children and ourselves, wasn't automatic — ever. Each of us regularly challenges herself to see more clearly, to train her eyes to focus on the new and the unfamiliar, to tune her ears to nuance beyond the melody — to pay attention to the implications of the unexpected. Maxine Green calls this ability “wide-awakeness”.

Research regularly informs our work. All children, including and especially atypical children, are our teachers. *Children who don't fit in* force us out of the box, require us to vigorously examine our thinking about teaching, to extend our ideas, and direct us towards a fresh view. Research validates and helps us honor the seriousness and importance of children's play.

It's arbitrary to divide our subject into chapters. It is particularly challenging since we, as observant and reflective teachers, had discovered many patches and pieces of this approach on our own. Some of these patches and pieces will appear in this book, since we're not pretending to tell you *everything about Reggio*, but rather we're describing *how we've integrated what we learn from Reggio* into our work. We can't really separate what we learned from them from what we learned from studying our children. What we learn from studying our children is as valid as what they learn from studying theirs. The people of Reggio were collaboratively weaving seamless whole cloth; our work is an American patchwork quilt. Reggio thinking is kaleidoscopic, multi-faceted; it is fluid and it almost always is contingent on many possibilities. The basic Reggio answer to any question about how, or when, or what, is: “It depends!” We're learning the meaning and value of that from them.

## Reading this book

We began reading and going to workshops, and started to think in Reggio Emilia terms (a few pages further on we'll tell you more about the city of Reggio Emilia). We were excited by them, and that led us to try to understand the rich, full, Image of the Child they've developed. In Part One we explore many aspects of the Image of the Child.

We began collecting data — photos, artworks, transcripts of children's language — learning a Documentation Process that assists us with planning and helps us realize and grow toward our potential while helping children see the vastness of the worlds of possibility and the purpose of research. We write about this Documentation Process in Part Two.

We refined our ability to look at what's happening from the child's perspective, aligning our viewpoints with theirs. We write about this in Part Three.

We learned to be reflective, to throw away old practices that didn't serve our communities. We learned to work together with other adults in more productive ways. This is in Part Four.

We learned new ways of giving children assistance in their thinking and their playing. We learned that the curriculum must be deep and broad, reflecting and responding to new and varied interests which emerge from the children, supporting expansion into projects. Our plans for the children's time must extend beyond the day, beyond the week and sometimes for many weeks on end, to foster deeper understanding and work (like play, a 'process' richest without a built-in schedule or timer). See Part Five.

We learned that children have daily experience with materials and arts, called languages in the Reggio community, through which they can express and explore their ideas and feelings. They will come to understand that they have approval and permission to explore these materials/languages, and discover their possibilities. As they become familiar with them, they use them to express what they want to say and they grow in craft and comfort. Ideally there will be an *atelierista* — a studio artist<sup>4</sup> — on your program's staff to support and assist teachers and children. This is Part Six of the book.

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4. See Materials Chapters for more information about the *atelierista*.

## About the authors

Leslie and I have each spent more than twenty years learning from the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia. Leslie first put these ideas to use in her classrooms in Ohio, serving a diverse population of children, many of them children with special needs. Later she moved to Honolulu, and she still teaches young children there, at Mid-Pacific Institute. This book references her experience in Ohio, where she was during the years we drafted this book. I hope she'll write another about her ongoing experiences at MPI, since they reflect a later, more advanced stage in her growth as a teacher. She has been a regular contributor to the online Reggio-L online discussion group since 2001.<sup>5</sup> Leslie's MA degree is in Educational Leadership, and her National Board Teaching Certificate was in Special Education, where she was taught to be a behaviorist, but she was never comfortable with that philosophy and chose constructivism just as soon as she encountered it.

Sydney has put ideas from Reggio Emilia to use in her workshops for adults, her individual coaching in SummerCamp<sup>6</sup>, articles in professional journals, her e-mail life (since 1996) on the Reggio-L online discussion group, and her consulting and speeches to schools, childcare organizations, workshops and conferences. Sydney's masters degree is in early childhood curriculum and supervision, and her pre-Reggio passions were for the work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner and for the work detailed in the Plowden Report, brought to the New York City public school where she was mentored by Dr. Lillian Weber in the 1970's. Sydney now lives in San Francisco.

Sydney, who teaches adults these days, wrote most of the book. Leslie, who has taught children full-time during the entire period of the writing, wrote many of the most exciting parts: stories of children's growth and her own, and her reflections. The book represents the thinking of both of us. When the book says "I" you can assume you're hearing Sydney, except if the section has been introduced as Leslie's story.

Jed Handler came into this project as a friend who likes to read and edit, and spent thousands of hours helping us. We want to gratefully acknowledge his help.

This book is meant to help you consider and expand your own Reggio Emilia journey, and to share things we've discovered in our practice.

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5. To join the Reggio online discussion group please send a message to [reggiolist@gmail.com](mailto:reggiolist@gmail.com)

6. SummerCamp is Sydney's joking name for intensive one-on-one week-long teacher seminars in her home, not necessarily in summer. Email her about her schedule and sliding scale (it's possible to garden or file in exchange for much of the cost), or scholarship fund. Find out more about SummerCamp at: <http://www.eceteacher.org/summercamp.htm>

## A note about Reggio Emilia

It's a city of about 130,000 in prosperous Northern Italy, a study in contrasts — a large Catholic community, a Communist government, a Lamborghini Factory, and it's the source of wonderful Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. It is an ancient, beautiful city, and one that has, in its best years, spent an amazing 17% of the municipal budget on the childcare program we admire and which inspires this book.

In Reggio Emilia, school buildings are different, timing is different, staffing is different, evaluation mechanisms and motives for evaluating are different from ours. The commitment they hold most importantly is an Image of Children as powerful, competent, full, and possessed of enormous powers of expression and with agendas of their own which get the respect they fully deserve. The teachers, artists, and pedagogues who support the children in this work are challenged to always be alert to children's signals, and to be on the side of community's wholesome growth.

People visit Reggio Emilia from all over the world to see what the best work with children looks like, return home excited by the possibilities for children they've seen — and some try to duplicate what the Reggiani do. Our writing recognizes that North America is different from Northern Italy, and shares our experiences trying to make *here* something that is informed by what we saw *there*. Our findings necessarily suit *our* culture. Ideas and experiences stemming from Reggio provocations have profoundly changed our thinking about what should happen here in programs for young children, and we believe you will be intrigued and challenged by them too!

Instead of setting down prefabricated permanent answers, we must keep thinking and paying attention to what the children are doing and saying and showing us. Rules get us into trouble; we try not to end up with rules that don't make sense or don't work. Children need to think things through and to see us do the same.

In Reggio Emilia, opposing ideas are celebrated and explored. Intellectual difference, even conflict, is *expected*, and challenging others to explain their ideas when you don't understand or agree with them is anticipated and encouraged; Reggio teachers have solid thinking behind what they do, and they can tell you why they are doing it. They challenge us, saying: "In Reggio when we disagree — the conversation begins. In the U.S., when educators disagree — the conversation stops."

We have tried to write here only about things we have experienced, and in working out what to say we have had conversations in agreement and in disagreement. These conversations are not always easy, but we believe they are deeply rewarding, and we are glad to share them! We want this book to start many more of those conversations — and we welcome conversation with you, our readers. Our email addresses:

[sydney@eceteacher.org](mailto:sydney@eceteacher.org)

[lesliegleim@yahoo.com](mailto:lesliegleim@yahoo.com)

## Dedications:

To Marcel Dancy and to Casey Rose Bali Clemens and Benjamin Clemens with love from their grandmother, and to River Lauren Hilal, from her Bubby. And to the SummerCampers who carry on the work. You know who you are. SGC

And to all the children and families who have and will have touched my life in my role of “teacher.” Especially to my sons Adam, Ethan and Daniel who have been the joy of my life, whose Image of the Child shines brightly. With much love, Mom. LG

# PART I: IMAGE OF THE CHILD



A four-year old in my 1973 class made this exquisite self-portrait.





# CHAPTER 1

## A strong Image of the Child: Bedrock of the Reggio Emilia approach

**O**ur journey into Reggio Emilia thinking begins by examining how we look at children. The Reggiani say their strong Image of the Child is the basis of their philosophy and makes possible their amiable, joyous, and productive schools for young children. (When we say “Reggiani” in this book we mean people in the Reggio Emilia Municipal Program for young children.) Leslie and I watch our Image of the Child continue to shift in response to learning from the Reggiani. We are amazed that the Image of the Child continues to transform our thinking about children.

Leslie and I have found the Reggio Emilia approach can be difficult to comprehend and even harder to integrate into our practices. We keep finding new, important aspects of the strong Image as we continue to observe and study — it’s exhilarating! The Reggio Emilia Approach addresses every aspect of Early Childhood Education, and overlaps what we already have figured out, especially if we have a constructivist perspective.<sup>7</sup> It is as if you put on a pair of eyeglasses from another planet. Wearing them you see the whole world in novel intergalactic colors; how could you begin to tell another person about these new hues and tints? These Reggio lenses are far more complicated than a simple shift in color, but perhaps that metaphor will help us understand that this is a profound change of perspective. The things we learn from Reggio Emilia allow us to see in new ways. We try these new ways and then practice learning to use them well. This isn’t the work of a moment, but of a lifetime.

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7. See *Chapter 6 starting on page 51*.

## The Reggio Emilia Image of the Child

Carlina Rinaldi, pedagoga and Director of Early Childhood Services in Reggio Emilia<sup>8</sup>, wrote this excellent summary of the Reggio Emilia Image of the Child:

The cornerstone of our experience, based on practice, theory and research, is the image of the child as rich in resources, strong and competent, rather than simply needy. They have potential, plasticity, openness, the desire to grow, curiosity, a sense of wonder, and the desire to relate to other people and to communicate.

Their need and desire to communicate and interact with others emerge at birth and are essential elements for survival and identification with the species. This probably explains why children are so eager to express themselves within the context of a plurality of symbolic languages, and why children are also very open to exchanges and reciprocity as deeds and acts of love that they not only want to receive but also want to offer. These form the basis of their ability to experience authentic growth . . .<sup>9</sup>

As we learn from Reggio Emilia while far away from Italy, we consciously develop our own “strong Image of the Child.” “Strong” doesn’t only describe the child’s strength, but also indicates that the Image itself has to be strong, to overcome our own conventional thinking. Why must we undertake a process of change and then act on our changed awareness? Because we intend to give our children the best we can imagine, discover and offer. Let us begin by examining the old image.

### The conventional Image of the Child

The nearsighted image we see all around us, framing most textbooks and curricula for children, says children are born empty, that they need to be filled up with information (mostly facts) so they can take on the work of the world. In college courses teachers are sometimes taught a child-centered curriculum but then they often find their job forces them into adult-focused instruction. There are pervasive messages in our society: babies and toddlers are to be stimulated and entertained (with bright primary colors, cartoons and noisy plastic toys), and preschool children need to be externally motivated or they’d

8. Carlina Rinaldi now fills the role originated by Dr. Loris Malaguzzi. See *page i* of this book.

9. Quoted in *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Edwards et al, Second ed. Page 114.

play all the time, and never develop a serious side. Young readers are given watered-down material to read so they aren't upset by work of complicated authors, or over-extended by work that requires thought. The nearsighted old image requires us to test children — even in the early grades — to find out if they've properly stored what we've told them, and to quantify how smart and obedient they are. Then — and this is the aim of testing — *we can measure them against each other*. This old image implies that if we pour many necessary bits of information (academics) into the children, they will fill up and become good citizens and employees.

This conventional image descends from the process of manufacturing, where you take raw material (the child) and put it through various processes (schools, sports, lessons in manners, etc.) until a finished product results. Viewing education in this way, the teacher oversees and manages the manufacture, supply and implementation (covering what's in the text) and tests the children to find out how well they can regurgitate the prescribed material.

As a result of the manufacturing image of the child endorsed by the government, the textbook publisher — now also the test publisher and test scorer — determines what children in kindergarten through high school are taught. The teacher becomes a puppet, her strings controlled by the scripted teacher's manual, laboring to convert the diverse group of children into uniform, fact-filled clones at the end of the assembly line.

### **We learn to see better: The Reggio Emilia Image of the Child**

The Reggio Image takes its metaphor not from nineteenth-century manufacturing but from agriculture. It is a direct descendent of the Froebel "*kindergarten*" which is to say a garden that grows children. While it may be new to us, the Reggio Emilia image has *ancient roots*, going back at least as far as Plato's Republic.

A seed is planted and a small plant emerges containing most of the necessary material inside it and needing only a few resources to grow: sun, water, occasional fertilizing or protection from inclement weather. The gardener, *in response* to her perception of the plant's current growth, assists the plant with water and protections to become stronger, to mature, to thrive.

*As a teacher, your task is to follow (responding to what you see) this child's growth, not to lead it.* You are making sure that children are healthy and safe, and your ability to access *material and human resources* will support children's interests. Your task is to figure out the most respectful, least-interrupting ways you can assist children in their intellectual, social, and emotional development.

When we follow four-year-old Sally's lead, taking into account what our observations of Sally have told us about her, we learn more about her and how to be good resource people to her. When we insist that children follow our lead, we find that they frequently resist and subvert our plans, preferring instead to follow their own perfectly good plans.

Our *mindfulness* needs to increase. Sylvia Boorstein wrote: "Mindfulness is knowing what is happening in this moment and what is happening in me in response to it."

Mindfulness helps us strengthen our Image of the Child and that helps us to grow full spectrum people.

## How I began to develop my strong Image of the Child

When I started to teach I had good intentions and liked children, but I had the wrong instincts and had to learn my craft: to *lower* my voice if I wanted children's attention, to pay immediate attention to the child who was hurt instead of the one doing the hurting, to give children a lot of choice. As I learned better ways to work with children I became known as the most flexible teacher in the building, but that didn't interfere with my ability to assert my own authority as needed to keep the children safe, healthy, courteous to each other and engaged in activity that would benefit them later. My class was always the first group out of the building in a fire drill.

When I visited Reggio Emilia in 1992, what I saw there spoke to my most deeply held values and led me to a new understanding of teaching with integrity and authenticity. Somehow I've been lucky enough (possibly because of my own painful childhood) to stay sensitive to how children feel. I often get a deep message from children about their feelings and about how people — parents or other caregivers or teachers — support or dismiss their feelings.

Visiting Reggio Emilia I saw that the Reggiani were deeply sensitive to children's emotions, actions and explorations. When Dr. Malaguzzi told us that the foundation of their work was their Image of the Child as rich, competent, full, and more, I began to see that this idea, this strong Image, would unify many of the things I had already learned — not to talk about children in front of them as if they didn't matter, not to threaten children in order to get them to work, not to prohibit things they were already doing capably such as climbing high on a fence or hillside. I realized that I now had to listen to the children in a fresh way, and to observe them differently, looking and listening to see and hear what they *could* do, *wanted* to do, what *they* had in mind.

Physical challenges meant that I was mostly finished teaching children by the time I heard about Reggio. My curiosity about this work led to my visiting classrooms and eventually getting to know Leslie, who taught children both before and since she began learning about Reggio. I've learned a lot more, and realized that there is always more to keep learning about the Image of the Child, including much to help us un-learn practices based on the common, but mistaken idea that children are empty, that our job is to fill them up. On several occasions, during visits to Pam Oken-Wright's<sup>10</sup> wonderful classroom, Pam gently stopped me from *helping* children; from doing the *automatic* explaining that I, a kind adult, was conditioned to offer children. It was clear that I hadn't yet (and still haven't) completely shed the dependent, weak Image of the Child. Pam's clear understanding allows *nothing* to get in the way of children's own *self-generated*, important learning process. She *enables children to explore in depth their own questions, opening the way for each child to grow her own strong, competent, admirable image of herself!*

## Trying it out

After we've glimpsed the strong Image of the Child there comes a time when some of us decide we want it for our children, and for ourselves. As we step into these new waters we want to explore these new ways of being with children, yet often find ourselves reverting to customary solutions, tentative about attempting or inventing new ways to proceed.

## Learning from children identified as atypical

Just starting to explore a strong Image of the Child can solve what might conventionally be considered a problem. Leslie comments from her Ohio public classroom where she taught 3-5 year old children who were typically developing alongside children with major disabilities:

I had to ask myself, "Do you truly believe in the rich, full and capable child — with no exceptions? Can you maintain that belief when the children seem unready? I look at the children I teach and try to identify and analyze their qualities. What are Jacob's *capabilities*? Do I see his *competence* emerging daily, in ordinary moments? These thoughts about each child became my baseline, my beginning Images of these Children.

Teachers must avoid sending mixed messages. I've heard people say they trust children — yet hover over them and make many decisions for them. I've

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10. Oken-Wright (whom I met on the Reggio online discussion group) teaches young children in Richmond, VA. It has been my great good fortune to visit her classroom on seven or eight occasions. I always learned a lot from her about skilled teaching, deeply rooted in what she has learned from Reggio. You will meet her again in this book, and you can find her in the Bibliography.

heard people say they respect the children yet speak about them as if they weren't sensitive. I've heard adults forbid a child to do something she has done successfully many times and *knows she can do well*. This kind of (pervasive) disrespect for children distorts, confuses and clouds our observations.

Leslie wrote:

Nina challenged my Image of the Child during one very long moment. One weekend we reorganized the classroom. Our newly arranged space featured many transparent containers, some of them made of glass, holding both familiar and new materials. When the children arrived Monday our rearranged room surprised them.

Nina, a child with cerebral palsy affecting her coordination and her walking, began to make her way over to the shelves. Walking was always a struggle for Nina, so it was great to see her wanting the gorgeous stuff enough to make the arduous journey. She arrived at the shelves and examined each container. I held my breath watching her reach for a crystal cup filled with beads. After a struggle, she grasped the cup and was able to cradle it. She looked thrilled — and I panicked; had I been crazy to put out all this glass?

Nina worked the glass against her chest and walked back to the table. I restrained my urge to get the glass and carry it for her — after all, she was a four-year-old with cerebral palsy! Nina had been my student for many months and knew I would help her if she asked, but she didn't ask. My inner voice, newly informed by readings from Reggio Emilia, asked, sternly, “Do you *truly* believe that *all* children are rich, full, and competent?” If this child didn't feel competent to take the glass cup to the table, she wouldn't be doing it. If I truly hold a strong Image of the child, if I believe in the confidence she displays, I have to bow to her judgment. If I am going to continue my journey with ideas from Reggio Emilia I have to *believe* in her competence.

She struggled with her first step, and continued slowly, awkwardly, to carry the glass cup to the table. As she reached the table she glanced over at me as if to say “I did it, I knew I could, thanks for trusting me, thanks for respecting me enough to not jump in and help me.” And she smiled. As I observed and documented Nina my Image grew stronger and broader. As my new Image of the Child grew, the children, starting with Nina, lived up to it.

## Helping the child grow

Our commitment to a strong Image of the Child requires us to search and study; to see the child's *current behavior* and also skillfully to imagine her *potential for an extended range* of behavior. We stay with a child as she explores something, actively seeking to understand the child, her work, and her relationships. We care about her choices. Reflecting on the details of what we observe will improve our ability to support her and will reward us for the time we've invested.

We try to align our perspective on a situation with the child's understanding. We seek congruence. When there is difference between our perspectives and the children's it is up to us to figure out the reasons the child has for his view and respectfully to help close the gap. Part Three will discuss this further.

## Negotiation: Tossing the ball

Dr. Malaguzzi said "the child tosses the ball to us, and we toss it back to him, adding our own interesting resources." Children toss the ball of *their interest* to aware, alert adults, who extend the children's interests with *resources*, tossing the ball back. At first the children don't realize how much more there is to know about this thing that interests them. It's our adult responsibility to open windows so the children can see that there's much more to learn, and can involve themselves in the real investigation of things of interest, encountering deeper and broader knowledge than what they initially imagined. When we throw the ball back skillfully, we nurture the children, allowing them to explore more deeply what is of interest to them.

## The Hundred Languages

Reggio educators (and parents everywhere) have found that *children need to communicate from the moment of birth*. Young children often have some difficulty getting their ideas communicated in their parents' *spoken* language. We introduce them to more ways ("languages") of communicating their ideas. This communication can take place in any of the ways human beings have discovered or invented to express their ideas and feelings; what Dr. Malaguzzi called "The Hundred Languages of Children"<sup>11</sup> including, but not limited to:

- Speech
- Movement
- Drawing

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11. You can read his poem by searching the internet for "Loris Malaguzzi" + "Hundred Languages of Children."



- Painting
- Clay work
- Wire
- Dramatic play (including dressing up)
- Collage
- Instrumental music
- Song
- Dance

In Reggio Emilia adults introduce children to a medium that can become a language after a child has explored it in depth and at length, a process I salute and call “messaging about.”<sup>12</sup> Once the child has become comfortable in the language, she can use it to represent what she thinks. She has gone from the messaging about stage to fluency in the new language. We’ve heard that “If you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Reggio thinking suggests, “if you have only a hammer, you need more tools and we’ll introduce you to them.”

## Negotiation benefits both child and adult

As children engage with materials and with each other they reveal to us possible directions for further exploration, providing us with the opportunity to develop authentic leadership and support. The dialogue between the child’s intention and the teacher’s resources is personal, timely, tailored to the particular child (or children), and enriches and educates both. As a bonus our new strong Image of the Child and our growing skills as responsive teachers mitigate the teacher burnout caused by inauthentic, rote, or unimaginative functioning. As time passes, instead of using only her pitching arm all day long, the teacher uses different muscles while the child is tossing the ball back. The traditional style of teaching was *edutaining*, with the teacher at the front of the room, showing children things they should want to learn. The practice we learn from the Reggiani is *educating*, bringing out resources that the children can use to construct knowledge.

Those who attempt to understand and implement the Reggio Emilia Approach are upholding a long humanist tradition that cultivates critical thinking, exploration and research, and honors childhood’s amazing wonderings. How very much this contrasts with the current fashion (2011) in the United

12. This wonderful term comes to us from the British Infant School movement of the 1960s, a remarkable and widespread experiment in allowing young children’s choices to be central in their education. See Weber and also Plowden in bibliography.



States during the time of No Child Left Behind<sup>13</sup> and the Race to the Top, of “teacher-proofing” texts, providing scripted lessons, and teaching to the test.

### Find the child’s intention: Observe, listen and explore!

Children have many interests. In daily practice teachers sort through the thousands of things that interest their children to find ones that contain knots and possibilities to explore. When we hit on one that seems a rich lode we look for a way to mine their intention. First, we listen for something that seems important to one child or a few children. For example, we notice a group of girls devoting a good bit of time playing that they’re horses.

### Find the part that’s HOT

We try to find out: why do these girls love *horses*? Is it their speed? Is it their beauty? Why is this a girls’ passion? Is it the My Little Pony™ toy horses that suggest all the rest of this? Is it the ability of horses to get us from here to there, or their place in literature or fantasy (heroes rescue on them, cowboys rope them and round them up)? Is it because horses have families as humans do, and children can play out some of their own stories? *What* about horses *matters* to these children? In contrast to common practice, we learn from the Reggiani to take time to think ahead about what we’re going to do.

Dr. Malaguzzi told us we should always think first of a *hundred* possible directions to move in; to keep ourselves ready to recognize, as we later observe the children, the one the children really want, one which might be the *hundred and first* on our list. Some people (including me) like to brainstorm a web<sup>14</sup> of all the things we can think of; others (including Leslie) make lists or outlines. Brainstorm as much as you can in whatever way suits you, but importantly, until you puzzle out what specifically resonates with the *children* you should *postpone any next steps* you take with them.

### About provocation

A provocation is a portal inviting you to enter. It’s an idea or question or action that carries the children more deeply into the subject. Provocation can move the children to a place where they see that there is more to be explored, depth they hadn’t seen at first. With the right provocative language we convey them to the vicinity where the depth is, so they can explore and

13. The backwards, pseudoscientific, woeful Federal legislation (2002) mandating conformity and scripting for teachers and very frequent high stakes testing for children.

14. A visual aid, which results in a freeform listing of subjects and ideas you connect with a central focus, in this case, horses. For more information google “curriculum web.”

respond more profoundly. New languages, materials and surprises provoke new thinking.

Observation helps a teacher explore the *meaning and function* of play for a child, so the teacher can develop questions or *provocations* to determine what will be needed to extend and deepen the play. When we are too hasty and immediately rush to extend play we run the risk of overwhelming children's thoughts, ideas or plans, stifling the very thinking we mean to encourage! One colleague says: "So many times I have, in my hurry, missed the children's point when they are really asking me to let them tell me what they know." The documentation process<sup>15</sup> guides us toward a more mindful, accurately targeted response which has far greater potential to fulfill the child's intention than an instant reaction does.

When might you want to provoke children in this way? When a child has shown you a general area of interest, you look for the precise part of that interest — the hot part — that matters to the child.

Sometimes after you've observed the children and talked with your colleagues, no further provocation is needed, but even consideration of possible provocations can assist you in planning.

Life provokes. Five-year-old Anthony's water experience was limited to showers and wading pools, so when I took him to a swimming pool, he began to think about going into water in a new way. A year later I drove Anthony across the George Washington Bridge. From the car, he noticed the Hudson River beneath us — and exclaimed, "That's a *big* swimming pool!" Traveling outside of his neighborhood had provoked him and made his thinking change, as travel so often does. If finding out about Reggio work has made you think that you've been teaching children in a superficial way, learning to provoke their thinking will help your teaching become more profound. A good start is to consider the question: "How am I going to introduce this subject so it will be most productive?" The resulting provocation is what you'll use to help yourself and the children enter deeper waters.

In one Reggio project the first substantial provocation was to have children compare drawings they made today with verbal descriptions they made yesterday, and notice which was a clearer description of what happened. Then the children considered why the drawings were inadequate, and listed what drawing skills they needed to learn, in order to show what they had described. This provocation set up a curriculum for weeks!

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15. The subject of Part Two, The Documentation Process.

*Provocation is a mighty tool. It's an approach to finding out what others believe and understand, and is often employed in Reggio Emilia to get children thinking more deeply. If you're looking for the next good step to take with the children, you will want to try provoking them to tell you what it might be. The result of thinking this way is rich and rewarding.*

## Continue observing

Pam Oken-Wright has done extensive work on uncovering children's intention. Below are a few of the many thoughts stimulated when I spent time with her in her classroom, and when she came to San Francisco to give her workshop on Intention.

Once you've found the *hot subject*, one the children care deeply about, moving to the next level involves supplying the children with resources — not *answers*, but rather questions and experiences which will help children construct theories and *search* for their *own* answers. In our example, you might ask the girls playing horses to draw a horse, or to draw themselves with horses.<sup>16</sup> You might put some miniature plastic, ceramic or wooden horses on a table for the children to examine. You might ask questions about the horse's family, or who gets to ride her.

Whether child-produced or teacher-gathered, these resources can raise new ideas and questions for the children and provoke further exploration, perhaps about horses that do very different things than those they already have in mind — horses at work in places that are less romantic than bringing knights to save us, or cowboys and cowgirls to ride the range.

## It's a messy practice

There are always tradeoffs between order and chaos, between clean and messy, between adult control and child control. It is much harder for adults to support children being active decision-makers and “messy” creators than to control things themselves and “cover the curriculum,” but the rewards are much, much greater. If a teacher's image is of a needy, empty child, and if her primary goals are to keep order and to follow a curriculum — then messy exploration, developing in unknown directions, will be stifled. But, if the teacher's primary intention is to support rich, capable children's growth in their ability to express themselves, to theorize and to investigate what interests them — then some tidiness will be temporarily sacrificed to support this creativity. In Reggio Emilia they call the follow-the-curriculum goals

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16. This subject was discussed on [page 10](#).

“programmazione” (programming) and the expressive, investigatory goals “progettazione” (project-ing), and they choose to spend their time and energy exploring and following the possibilities of the latter. You will read more about this in our chapter on Projects.

## Don't answer too quickly

In the story that became the title of my first book, *The Sun's Not Broken, A Cloud's Just in the Way: On Child-Centered Teaching*,<sup>17</sup> Hamid asked me, “The sun's broken?” during a long spell of dark, foggy weather. I told Hamid “It feels that way, Hamid, but the sun's not broken, a cloud's just in the way.” He went away, seemingly satisfied. Now, as I reflect on it, I realize that when we (kindly and helpfully but forgetting our new strong Image of the Child) supply this kind of answer, we end the discussion just as I did, unfortunately, at that time. I didn't facilitate an opportunity for Hamid to construct his understanding — his own theory of weather changes — and I should have.

As adults begin learning to follow a child's lead and then to provide provocations and resources, we tend to head straight to solutions (the way I did with Hamid). Initially, we don't know how to *probe* for the children's deeper meanings. Our adult listening skills still have to be developed. We haven't yet learned how best to reflect the question back to the children, to *begin* a dialogue, instead of shutting it down. Knowing what I know now, I could have told Hamid, “It sure *feels* broken. Let me think about that, and you think about it too, and we'll talk again later.” I'd have written down, in front of Hamid, a note to myself to come back to him with some ideas about finding out why the sun felt broken. He was using the metaphor of machines breaking down, a familiar metaphor in his community. Tossing the ball back, I could have helped him explore ways things disappear besides being broken — for example, hidden behind a curtain, or tucked inside a bag. Then he could move in the direction of constructing *another theory*, one based on nature rather than machines.<sup>18</sup> Re-opening the discussion after we'd both had time to think would have resulted in a very different journey for us.

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17. The book, published by Gryphon House, is out-of-print at this time. You can often find inexpensive copies at [abebooks.com](http://abebooks.com) or e-mail me at [sydney@eceteacher.org](mailto:sydney@eceteacher.org) I try to have some copies on hand.

18. See [page 51](#)

## Listen longer

When Penny asks a question, ask yourself, “Is she asking me, or herself?” If she isn’t asking me, I must stay out of the conversation, but listen for further information so I can be thinking along with her in case she wants my help later on.

How do I help children explore their own ideas? I can locate materials or offer new experiences and, if children are stuck or losing interest or frustrated, then I can repeat to them the words they were using with each other — “Remember, Penny, yesterday you asked, *‘How can I get this clay to stand up?’*” Using these words I’m trying to return Penny to her original intention, to encourage her to make me understand what she wants to explore or attempt. My goal is to help Penny make her intent happen, not mine.

Practice listening a little longer and *repeating Penny’s own words* back to her. Make sure you understand each other’s words and meanings or else amazing nonsense can result. We have all experienced events like this one, reported to the Reggio online discussion group by Phyllis Porter:

A 6 yr. old girl who had been abused was required to testify in court. Her lawyer asked her if she knew what a jury was. The little girl insisted, yes, she did know. Finally the lawyer asked her what it was. She explained it was stuff you *wear on your wrist and your neck.*

Keep the possibility of confusion in mind when you try to determine a child’s intention — and be willing to ask! Don’t just provide something without consulting beforehand: “Would scarves help the dance work better?” “Would this project work better outdoors?” “Did you want to see that (picture, video, bird’s nest, toy horse, whatever) again?”

## Lessons from Laura

Carlina Rinaldi often begins a discussion of the Image of the Child with the *Laura and the wrist watches* photographs.<sup>19</sup> She shows her audience four photographs, one at a time. In the first photo we see a 12-month-old baby sitting at a table with her caregiver. The baby is looking intently and animatedly at a catalog or magazine showing a two-page spread of wristwatches. In the second photo we see that the caregiver has extended her wrist to the baby, and is showing her the actual watch on her own wrist. The baby is giving this watch

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19. We first saw these photos in the One Hundred Languages of Children Exhibit. Since we wrote this, a beautiful book, *The Diary of Laura*, has been published by Redleaf Press. It shows these photos plus much more of Laura’s story from her first year, with commentary about how documentation can be used by us as a tool to expand our understanding of children.

full and rapt attention. In the third photo the caregiver holds the watch to the baby's ear, letting her hear the tick-tock. (The modern reader must remember this was in the '80s, before digital, silent watches came into use.)

When I show these photos to a workshop group, I stop here, and ask the participants to each tell another person what will happen next. I promise that it's the next logical thing to happen. After they've had time to share their theories with each other, I show them the last photo. The baby has her ear to the magazine, *checking to see if these watches also tick-tock*.

My audience's energy is always electric at this moment. Most of the people present don't figure it out until I show the last photo to them. People who predicted things like "she'll put the watch in her mouth" or "the baby will wear the watch" realize that they have grossly underestimated Laura who, at age 12 months, has *made and tested an hypothesis*. "If that one ticks," Laura thinks, "perhaps the ones printed on the page will tock too?" And she listens, to check her hypothesis!

After the group has seen all four photos, just about everyone is thrilled at Laura's highly intelligent analysis. As Henry David Thoreau said, "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." Those who expect the watch to go into Laura's mouth often insist "but that's the stage this baby is at" as if that was adequate justification for what they thought. Finally, many people promise themselves to see children more clearly, as individuals, not only as representatives of their age group.

I want them to find out about Laura from Laura *herself*, instead of depending on *generalized knowledge* about her stage of life, learned from a textbook. We must respect and attend to the child in front of us, and never depend solely on abstractions or generalizations. The documentation process (see Part Two) guides us toward a more mindful, targeted response that has greater potential to fulfill the child's intention than any *instant, immediate reaction* could.

Our goal is to help children's work continue and deepen. We want the children's play to become more complex, we want the children to experience investigating and creating things that take time and thought. As we look for ways to support this process we will become more careful listeners. As the children's play deepens, when they are encouraged and empowered to explore their theories and ideas, we adults also grow in our ability to understand and support the ways the children think; how they process and work through theories, ideas, and projects. Meanwhile the children's understanding and appreciation of *their own capability* increases. The key question is: how do we

take a four-year-old's interest and her current thinking and help her move it to the next level? How do we support her learning?

## It depends

When the Reggioiani want to scaffold<sup>20</sup> a child's learning, instead of returning to custom or tradition, they collect information about what is happening currently, information we will call "data." They frequently answer visitors' questions about how they do something by saying "It depends." Their solutions are context-dependent: they look for the specific concerns and the particular interests, the available comprehensions and the remaining confusions of the children. They look at how the day works and times when it doesn't. Their primary ways of collecting data are taking photographs and recording children's talk. After collecting the data they *examine and discuss what they've found*, to see what it reveals and conveys. They also review what the children have said or made. They show or read the data to the children and what the children say in response creates more data. They meet collaboratively and repeatedly with colleagues — and from this work theories and analyses emerge. They've found that when they collect this information, examine it again with children and other staff, and plan action based on it, they serve the children best. Since this process is unfamiliar, we have to muster the courage to make the time and to develop the craft needed to change and work in new ways.

We can't really separate the subject of the documentation process from that of changing our Image of the Child. To manage the latter, we must practice the former. In Part Two of this book we will discuss how to collect data and reflect on it as part of an organized study of children, to help move the children's exploration step-by-step in the direction of their intention.<sup>21</sup>

There are many things that can sidetrack a strong Image of the Child. Children with special needs<sup>22</sup> are missing some skill sets. Can the Reggio Emilia strong, full Image work for them? Leslie's experience has taught her that it can and it must. When I visited her Ohio classroom I saw that the children with "special needs" were reaching for full lives, shifting their boundaries, exploring ways out of the conditions that constrained them. They were, it seemed, getting ready to be more autonomous. In the next chapter you'll see one case of how that worked.

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20. Scaffold is a word we associate with Vygotsky, indicating the help given by a more skilled peer or an adult to a child who can't yet quite manage a piece of learning on her own. The learning of the more advanced thinker provides a place for the less advanced to stand (hence, a scaffold) while he explores a new idea or practice. There's more about Vygotsky starting on [page 51](#).

21. Child study is explored in depth and with respect in Himley and Carini, *From Another Angle*, TC Press, 2000.

22. It's impressive that in Reggio Emilia they're called Children with Special Rights!





## CHAPTER 2

One ball at a time  
By Leslie Gleim

*Here's an important experience, showing Leslie's developing Image of the Child and how it helped her connect to a little boy. The other adults in the school — who had a weak image of the child — thought him beyond help.*

Everyone had given up on Justin, an almost-5-year-old in the class down the hall. When Justin arrived at our school he could speak in short phrases but generally used only a word or two. Instead of talking, he bit children and adults daily in a way that seemed intentional, unpredictable, and savage. Other children complained when he came near them, fearful of his hitting, biting and pushing. Although Justin wasn't in my class, I observed him and wondered if some of the reactions of the teachers — putting him in “time out,” scolding him for his misbehavior, and seldom acknowledging his good behaviors — were making him misbehave even more.

When that school year ended I volunteered to have him in my class. The school's director and I both felt that if ever a child needed our special approach, Justin was that child. My journal for that year shows not only Justin's journey but also my own. My work helped me rid myself of old attitudes and solidify my Image of the Child so I could understand what was happening and help Justin.

### My Image of the Child is tested

From his first day with us I saw that Justin needed me far more than the other children in our group. Our first month together confused and perplexed me — never before had I encountered a child like this. His biting, hitting and shoving seemed to be random, unprovoked. By now all the other teachers wanted to expel him. In addition to trying to find a way to help him I had to contend with peer disapproval.



Well, either I had a strong Image of the Child, or I didn't. I set my goals: I would learn who Justin was by *observing* him, not just institute modification of his worrisome behaviors. I was going to help Justin *believe in himself*.

Our center had a ball pit then (later we got rid of it for sanitary reasons.) The very first photo of Justin, buried deep in the ball pit, shows only his hands, held defensively, and one eye peeping out.

**9/14.** It is September and this is how people at school see Justin now. The balls symbolize the negative behaviors that block their view.

My job was to dig into the ball pit, removing one ball at a time, allowing Justin to be seen whole, not a danger, simply a little boy.

**10/10.** If I used behavior modification I certainly could control Justin, probably decrease his biting and hitting by as much as 95%. But I have many questions: Does modifying his behavior with rewards and punishments align with my Image of a rich, competent child? Is it ethical to use this power or knowledge to control a child? Is it respectful? Does it respect Justin? Into whose image of the perfect child should we shape Justin? Will behavior modification change him so that he'll behave differently in my absence? Or will he only behave well when he thinks he's being watched?

I could request that an adult be assigned to shadow and help Justin — but this would lead him to be dependent on that adult to fix things for him. Better to nurture his own ability to solve problems. He also needs to develop more language, so he can express his needs without hurting others.

By now, on the playground or in our gym, center staff had developed a double standard: they saw almost anything that Justin did as bad behavior, yet when other children pushed and wrestled just as he had, there were no consequences. If Justin was involved he was always sent to time out. Some staff would immediately encourage children to leave an area as soon as Justin entered it, or when another child and Justin were playing appropriately they would nonetheless break up the play. Cued by the adults, the other children began to stay away from Justin.

**10/13.** More questions: What do we consider “normal” behavior? Who is the judge? What right does this school have to create a different standard for Justin? What tools does Justin need so he can learn with and from his peers? How can the other children help him? What can I do to support peer assistance and to give Justin new ways to cope? I have observed so much of Justin's

positive behavior during the past two months! I've seen him wait patiently for a turn, work gently beside other children building with clay, drawing side by side on the chalkboard with classmates Alyssa and Ethan, stooping down to pick up a toy and then handing it to Timmy, our youngest child. These golden moments let me see that he wants to belong to this community. How can we support him?

**10/16.** Today, after the first shift of children went home, I went outside with Sara, Andrew, and Justin. All three children headed for the tricycles. Later, Andrew stopped riding and began walking on the ledge of the large flower box framed with wide landscaping timbers. Andrew walked as if it were a tightrope. Soon Sara joined him. Justin stopped riding his tricycle and watched them. I asked Justin, "Can you do what Andrew and Sara are doing?" He said "Sure," and jumped up on the ledge and joined them. Then all three children pranced on, teetering back and forth, arms out for balance as they walked along the ledge.

Soon all three were giggling and laughing. Justin was happy. He laughed out loud. Not only was he happy with himself, he was included in the community of these other two children! The moment was enchanting!

Next Justin asked me to come and play with them. I joined in their play. After a few moments I pretended I was going to fall and said, "I need help!" Justin, from in front of me, said, "Here! Hold on." Astonished, and a bit cautious — because previously he hadn't liked anybody to touch him from behind and had bitten them for doing it — I put my hands on his shoulders. Now he said, "Hold on tight, Teacher." We worked our way around the flower box — First Sara, then Andrew, and then Justin with me holding onto him. We laughed and laughed. On one of our circuits I glanced over and saw an orange ball from the ball pit lying on the sidewalk! It reminded me not to hurry this child, to remove only one ball at a time, to let Justin emerge at a gentle pace.

The buses arrived to take the children home, so our playing had to end. The children gathered their backpacks and walked ahead. I asked Justin to wait for me since he tended to run alarmingly and I put out my hand for him to hold. This time our eyes met and Justin said, "No! I do it." His uncharacteristic use of language reminded me that he had trusted me to put my hands on his shoulders during our earlier play. Again, he was asking me to trust him. I took the risk: "OK you can go, but remember to walk." He smiled and turned and walked a few steps ahead of me to the bus.

As he walked to the bus Justin seemed a head taller than his usual self. Did I trust him? I had treated him as if he were a competent child, and he had behaved the way a competent child does. Did I now believe that all children were full of potential? It was a critical time for both of us, this exchange of trust, a key that unlocked the door between us.

A few weeks after that amazing day, I observed Justin as he arrived at school and launched into one unacceptable behavior after another. He didn't stay with any activity (not even blocks, his favorite) for more than a minute. Restless and edgy, he flitted around the room, and when Timothy brushed up against him he hit him.

I crossed the room to him, since I could see the signs that he was about to unleash his full fury, which usually led to biting. I took his hand to lead him over to the Matchbox™ cars he loved. As we walked together he stopped suddenly and his hands raised from his side and began to jerk. I felt this while his hand was in mine, and thought that he was probably having a seizure. The episode was brief, just a couple of seconds long.

Later I learned that other adults in the school had observed similar episodes from time to time, but had not told each other or consulted with our school nurse about them.

After this discovery the team developing and monitoring Justin's Individual Education Plan — his parents, the school nurse, the occupational therapist, the speech teacher and me — agreed we needed to have Justin evaluated by a doctor. The first tests by a local doctor found him normal, but I persisted, continuing to document any out-of-control behavior. The documentation soon convinced his doctor to involve a specialist who determined through neurological testing that Justin was indeed having a rare type of seizure, and his biting and kicking stemmed from these mini-seizures. This condition was found to be the root of many, perhaps all, of his distressing behaviors.

The kind of seizure Justin had would actually begin about forty-five minutes before his symptoms were noticeable. As he felt the changes that were happening in his body, with no understanding as to why, *his capacity for self-control would disintegrate*. During the seizure Justin had no understanding of what was happening, and responded with desperation.

The doctors said that it would take forty-five minutes or so after each seizure for Justin to recover. With this information I was able to begin to separate him from the other children so he wouldn't get anxious and defensive, and so that nobody would be hurt.

The doctor took my observations and notes into consideration as he determined Justin's daily medicine dosage. On certain days, before correct dosages were established, or when his medicine hadn't been administered, he'd have a storm of seizures. Matters were complicated by Justin's mother who, at first, was not disciplined enough to give him his medicine every day. On the days when he obviously wasn't medicated, I made it a practice to call her, insisting that she come and get him, telling her the medicine wasn't working. This tactic worked, and soon she learned to give Justin his medicine on schedule.

After his medicine dosage was stabilized, Justin's days at school became seizure-free. A new Justin emerged. Now he was able to enjoy school without frightening himself or others or missing parts of his day. His outbursts and anger began to disappear. Justin made friends with other children. As his seizures came under control his smile warmed us every day, and the smiles and giggles that first appeared on the flowerbox ledge that riveting day in October now warmed our January.

**2/14.** We were in the middle of a staff meeting when Justin and his Mom came in. His Mom said, "Sorry to interrupt your meeting, but Justin and I were at the store and he found this." She held up a ceramic valentine bear that said "I love you." "Justin insisted that I get it for Teacher. He wouldn't let me go home until we stopped by here and gave it to you." Justin brought me the bear, smiling from ear to ear. Then he threw his arms around me and hugged me!

This was Justin's thank you. He had inspired and challenged me to observe him closely enough to find the cause of his distress, to become a fighter on his behalf, and to let go of the remaining vestiges of the Behavior Modification-based teaching I was trained in. Learning how to allow Justin, untroubled, to emerge, I finally and fully embraced the Image of a strong, powerful, capable Child.

**9/2006 (4 years later)** Reviewing the documentation of my journey with Justin revealed my own growth as a teacher during that year.

The daily, detailed documentation ended abruptly in late January. I no longer wrote about him daily because the seizures were under control, and *Justin had moved himself from the margin of our circle to the mainstream of our classroom community*. Now my usual daily group documentation served Justin as it did the other children, now that he was simply included another active member of our classroom.

I didn't realize how much that year with Justin was going to challenge me as a teacher and as a colleague. Neither did I comprehend the intensity or amount of work that would be required of me.

Despite the enormous changes in his behavior, some others on the staff, rather than celebrate his growth and new abilities, continued to harbor their image of Justin as out of control. Nothing I said or did changed that. I hadn't accepted staff judgments and I hadn't made a plan to "fix" Justin through positive and negative reinforcement. I was instead, informed by the close observation, and I helped Justin join the community. In return, he changed forever my Image of the Child.

Now I know I must advocate for children who are seen as less (capable, wholesome, friendly, balanced) than their peers. If we search each child for abilities, and supply each child with what he or she needs, we will be doing our work properly, with renewed energy and commitment. As his doctors, his mother, his classmates and I removed the last balls covering Justin, we came to know more fully his courage and his joy.

# CHAPTER 3

## Get clear about why you do what you do

*Once upon a time, a woman phoned her husband and asked him to “Stop at the butcher shop on the way home, buy a pot roast, and have the butcher cut off five inches from the end.” The husband, in a hurry, said he’d do so, and hung up.*

*When he arrived home with the meat in a brown paper bag, the husband asked his wife “why cut off the five inches?”*

*The wife said, “I don’t know. My mother always had the butcher cut off five inches, so I do, too.”*

*They telephoned Mom, and asked her why the five inches were to be cut off. Mom replied, “I don’t know. My mother always had the butcher cut off five inches, so I do, too.”*

*So they telephoned Grandma, and asked her. “Simple,” she replied. “My pot was too short.”*

**T**his traditional story illustrates a fundamental educational principle: ***don’t do anything in your classroom unless you understand why you’re doing it.*** Many things not worth the children’s time have been *handed down* as early childhood rituals. I’m going to call them pot roast.

Our new image of the child doesn’t permit pot roast! Here’s Leslie’s experience:

### The rigid schedule (biggest pot roast of all)

For many years I felt constrained by the schedule on the wall — our day was controlled by the schedule:

- 8-9** Staggered arrivals: put coats and belongings in cubbies, bathroom, all in central (large motor: bicycles, climbing, free play) room where all classes mingled
- 9:00** Go into our art-focused classroom. Circle time.
- 9:30** Wash hands and snack
- 9:45** Go to one of the other activity rooms. (Manipulative, dramatic play, science and math.) Change to the next activity room at 10:15 and the third room at 10:45
- 11:15** Bathroom, line up, wash hands go to lunch room and eat lunch,
- 12:00** Toilet and nap. Everyone rests for full time
- 2:15** Outdoor or large motor (gym) time
- 3:00** Begin boarding buses to go home (staggered dismissal).

Provoked by what I learned from Reggio Emilia, I examined each segment of the day, asking if it served the children's learning, and whether it required its precise spot in our day. My goal was to have every transition and activity contribute to a relaxed, exploration-friendly, process-honoring environment for these three-to-five-year-old children.

Our many transitions interrupted the children at work. What would happen if we went to lunch ten or fifteen minutes earlier or later? What if we looked at the day in longer chunks rather than quarter-hours and half-hours? *Unless we relaxed our relationship to the clock*, important work of the children would continue to be disrupted, truncated or lost.

We had always started the day with a time when children would greet each other and then choose what they wanted to do. After they got started it wasn't easy to get those busy children to disengage and come to circle time. Doesn't our strong Image of the Child mean we should respectfully let children finish what they are working on, rather than persist with a schedule handed down to us? When they are ready to move on to the next classroom appointment, shouldn't it be a gentle transition?

Our staff experimented to find more natural times for transitions — instead of watching the clock we learned to sense the ebb and flow of the children's energy and interest. The beginning and end of our day were fixed, but the children and I now negotiated and orchestrated what happened in between.

We also had to coordinate our times with the private childcare program housed in our building and with the staff who tended to the yard. We adults learned to check in with each other, sharing our sense of when the children were ready to move on. We had abandoned the rigid institutional schedule, moving to our own, *tailored-to-fit*, rhythm!

When they enter in the morning, as they greet each other, some children survey the room for any surprises they may find. Other children browse the documentation area to see photos of work they've done and still others go watch the computer scrolling through images from yesterday. Some other children go directly to the block area, the easel or the play house, diving into work they've planned on their way to school.

The chunks of a recent day turned out to be:

**8:00-10:15** Arrival, time in large motor room, transition when we were ready to our room for breakfast and children's choice of activity

**10:15-11:15** Some children in a small group learning encounter, developed in response to teacher observation of children. *The other children are working with activities of their own choosing.* Teachers stay aware of IEP (Individual Education Plan) goals and make sure they're included in this small group work. Now, instead of automatically rotating every half hour, we stayed the full time in one activity classroom. Additionally, each class had a home room (mine was the Art Room) where they spent most of each day. Toileting, as needed.

**11:15-12:00** Washing hands and lunch in the lunchroom.

**12:00-12:45** Work with continuing activity or new provocation, in our room. This would be the teacher's choice. Sometimes some children went elsewhere with an aide while Leslie worked with a group on a particular project.

**12:45-1:30** Some children nap, others are outdoors when weather permits or in gym

**1:30-2:15** Toileting, washing hands, and snacks

**2:15 – 2:30** Gym or outdoors, prepare to go home, schoolbus or parents pick up children.

This was the printed schedule. In reality we adjusted times and the amount of time spent in each block varied according to the children's level of engagement.



The children no longer wait for me to say “Let’s begin the day.” Now parents and visitors could come in and talk with me while the children continue working. Our old, formal schedule was now transformed, and we danced, at last, to our own beat!

Some years later, working in Hawai’i, Leslie’s view of scheduling continued to evolve. Looking at how the Reggio explain their scheduling meetings she arrived at a process of *making appointments* for the day with the children, inviting them during morning meeting to join (or skip) planned groups, and honoring their ideas about what they want and need to do today. This lets teachers respond to children’s interests. As a result children’s timing is based on the inner rhythms of the children, and not on lockstep institutional rigidity. Leslie says, “Now we make appointments *with* the children rather than demand that they stop what they’re doing to follow *our* agenda.”

## You have to know yourself

As Leslie and I went about developing our full, rich Images of the Child, we tried to ask and answer questions about ourselves. Who am I? What do I believe about how children learn? How do I help myself change? What do I want for children? How can I get out of the way of a child, and support *his* exploration and discovery rather than telling him the right answer? What’s my style? Am I like this child in the way I employ my senses, or different from him?

We slowly learned that the teacher’s task *isn’t to control, limit or restrict children* by keeping them on the same task or page, *but to research, support and invite* a wide range of individual and group expression. She is also responsible to restore balance and order between times of creative chaos.<sup>23</sup>

Grownups are generally comfortable with children when the children are doing what the grownups think they’re *supposed* to be doing, when their attention is where the teacher means for it to be. Trouble begins when the children don’t “mind” the grownups — when they do something that *isn’t what was asked of them*.

Some adults do what they have always done in that situation: show disapproval, yell, bench the child, and ask Alice why she’s doing whatever she’s doing. I’ve seen unskilled teachers say, strangely, “I beg your pardon!” or ask “Why did you do that?” as their standard response to something they

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23. This order is what Ashton-Warner wanted when she wrote about *Breathing Out and Breathing In*, using the metaphor of an overstuffed suitcase, so full you’d have to sit on it in order to get it to shut. Children, she said, come to school full of stuff which wants to be expressed, and only if they’ve let out some of that stuff are they ready to take in any new stuff.

didn't like. I've seen teachers and parents start to count — and the counting sounds ominous. I've seen them tell children they won't be allowed to — go outdoors, have dessert, watch TV or videos, go on the field trip, play with the toy — and then seen the teacher either *carry out* such a threat or *forget* it. I'm not sure which is worse for the children.

In Reggio Emilia adults are alert to surprising behaviors and find them *interesting*. Reggiani think creatively about why the child does this thing, knowing that *behavior has reasons*. They bring past experience forward to inform the present situation, *looking closely at what is different in the new situation*.<sup>24</sup> They call this “*problematization*”<sup>25</sup>. We've seen how Leslie approached and later revised her schedule when she realized it was pot roast. When teachers and parents slow down and analyze each bothersome situation, they are more likely to find satisfactory solutions, and less likely to burn out.

Our job requirements often impede developing a strong Image of the Child. We sometimes whistle tunes that aren't so happy, to satisfy insurance requirements or administrators or politicians — people who usually don't know our children and cannot see how their rules wreak havoc in our lives. They impose standards and leave us to fulfill them. It's frustrating to be barred by bureaucracy in this way, and kept from using possible resources. Our new Image of the Child means following the children's lead. Leslie found that we incidentally meet those standards while we primarily concentrate on *meeting children's needs*.<sup>26</sup>

Leslie, in the Daily Sheets she provided to parents early in her Reggio journey, indicated how the Ohio State Standards were being met. She didn't have to add activities to meet those standards, just to keep her eye on the activities of the children and then list how those standard items were covered in the natural course of events. We must never shift the curriculum away from the children's interests and well-being to meet the needs of a faceless external imposer of standards.

### Let the children practice! You already know how

Ask yourself: Is there something I do or announce every day that some of the children have learned? If so, relinquish those tasks to a child, or rotate them among volunteering children. This can be “we have to be quiet when

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24. For a longer discussion of “Reading Behavior” see Clemens, S. *Pay Attention to the Children, Lessons for Teachers and Parents from Sylvia Ashton-Warner*, pp 132-135.

25. See *page 158*.

26. We're not against standards, but expect that they should vary with the individual, so the standards a professional musician meets are different from those required of a carpenter, and of the amateur musician, as well. The same goes for children. One standard for all seems to create ice cube trays — though all children are unique!

we walk past the babies napping,” or “dry your hands really dry” or “after you wash and dry your hands you should go straight to the table” or “hold onto the bannister” — whatever fits for you. Giving the responsibility of reminding others to children means that they learn some leadership skills, and take responsibility for the group. After a few months of this, it is possible that the children will be ready to act on the reminder without anyone stating it... the courtesy or hygiene or safety implied will have become part of the culture of the group.

## Involving the children

Is there material in the room that’s no longer used? What value do I place on it? Your answers will determine whether you discuss removing the material with the children or, instead, think of ways to provoke renewed interest in it.

Is there a part of the day that’s not working? What are the details of this dysfunctional part of the day? Is it too rushed? Are the children fatigued from doing similar things for too long? Would going out for a run before the next activity make a difference? Would a different kind of transition matter? Have the children outgrown it? Can it be discarded? Is it pot roast? Observe (and ask others to observe) to discover what’s really going on, and then act on your answers!

Your concern to grow and extend your skills to support children’s growth and development will be evident to the children, their parents, and your colleagues (some of whom will like this and others who may be threatened by it). Honing your skills will keep you from burning out and becoming emotionally exhausted, and your resulting vitality and energy will be reflected in the children’s attention to their relationships and their work. When you function authentically and mindfully the children will become the best possible partners in your continuing education!

In the ‘90s, consulting to the large program at The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Children’s Center, I met with the eight experienced adults who worked with toddlers. The room where we met had a bird in a birdcage high up that could be lowered by a pulley. As an example of how to use what was in the environment, I suggested that next time the teacher brought the birdcage down, she might offer the children clipboards with soft pencils to draw the bird. I had learned from the Reggioiani to abandon what I’d been taught: that we shouldn’t ask children to draw a particular thing. I learned in Italy that *inviting* children to draw something that interests them is a fine thing to do, and thought I was passing this idea along. But that’s not how I was heard.

Instead, the senior teacher said to me, in a kind voice while patting me sympathetically on the hand, “Perhaps you haven’t worked with this age group — you will want to know that they don’t do representational drawing.”

I replied, “Yes, but when children can’t talk we still talk with them, *expecting* that they will grow into conversation. I think it’s the same way with drawing.”

I expected a defensive response, but I was wrong. The teacher’s eyes opened wide, and she said, “I must have been doing my job too long. I’ve gone on automatic!” I was awed by her response, and told her so. I continued to observe and meet with teachers in this center for the next day-and-a-half, but this incident burned brightly in my mind. At our closing meeting, after each person present listed one thing she or he had learned, I retold this story, and said it reminded me of a grave danger in our work. Then I told them the Pot Roast Story.

The sad part of being a consultant is that often I fly in and teach and then I fly out having little or no idea afterwards what anyone found useful. Imagine my delight months later when center director Pam Boulton let me know that her staff had decided to have a monthly Pot Roast Meeting, for the purpose of examining existing practices to see if they were happening because they were habit, (in which case they would be discarded) or because the present context *warranted* them.

Years later, I wrote to Pam, asking what had become of their pot roast meetings. Here’s her reply:

We haven’t had any actual pot roast meetings for quite a while, but the phrase often comes up — and as we explain to newer staff what we mean, the conversations start spontaneously. It has now become part of the culture.

Sometimes we bring it up deliberately around a topic we are struggling with. Sometimes we simply ask a quick question about something — like “is this pot roast, or do we really need it to be this way?” It never fails to lighten the load with a laugh and it always brings good problem-solving skills to the fore. Thanks!

I’ve been wondering, ever since, how to get other agencies to have such meetings. *Looking at what we always do — to see if we mean to be doing it now, with these children, in these circumstances — can free us from the past and make us more effective today and in the future, improving the services we offer our community.*

## Speaking to children

Avoid affecting a “teachery” voice, abandoning conversational English for knee-jerk phrases such as “good job<sup>27</sup>,” “criss-cross applesauce,” and “use your words”.<sup>28</sup> This kind of behavior doesn’t celebrate you as a teacher or the children as strong, competent, whole beings. Here’s an old story:

Johnny comes home from his first day at kindergarten. “What did your teacher say to you?” asks his mother. “I don’t know” replies the child. “Sometimes she called me “Children,” and sometimes she called me “Boys” and sometimes she called me “Blue Table.”

This teacher’s language doesn’t honor Johnny, nor does it reflect the personal, caring attention that characterizes how we want to treat each child, as we construct our own new Image of the Child.

The classroom is a special place, yet it needs ordinary, sturdy, everyday language. Children are learning what kind of talk works in the world. Whether Standard English is spoken at home or not, children will eventually need to learn the teacher’s way of communicating (which models speech used in the business and other formal worlds) in addition to what they are hearing at home, so they can be appropriate in *both* places. It helps children to have models that speak Standard English and also understand and respect the language spoken in their homes.

## Bringing the best of Reggio Emilia thinking to your community

Are Italian children different from those we teach here? After seeing documentation panels from Reggio some people believe that Italian children are simply different than American children. Some ask, “Can their Image work for our children?”

The Reggiani observe and think all the time about their children; and if we observe and think all the time about ours *we can’t go wrong*. We may often have different emphasis, but if we keep observing and thinking we can’t go wrong. While there are cultural differences, and differences in community expectations, children are still children. This book tells how Leslie and I went about changing ourselves to think about children as competent, intentional and powerful. If, instead, adults continue thinking children cute and needy, they will not comprehend any part of Reggio Emilia thinking. The goal is

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27. Instead of “good job” notice the specific work the child is doing: “you climbed high,” or, “you put pink right next to the green.” Instead of criss-cross applesauce ask children to sit *so you don’t bother anyone else*. Instead of “use your words” say “please talk to him/her.”

28. See Alignment and Routines Chapters, this book.

to learn to view each problem with a focus and emphasis on what the child can *already understand* and do, not what she is lacking — keeping your work authentic. The examples from Leslie’s and Marie’s classrooms in this book exemplify the way.

In North America many of our communities are multicultural, in contrast to Reggio Emilia where nearly all of the people are Italian by heritage, birth and culture.<sup>29</sup> Here, where a wide variety of cultures mix together, there are more chances for cultural misperceptions and colliding values, and these differences must be considered and discussed as part of the general understanding of their community by teachers and parents. Furthermore, a wider range of educational levels exists here. Our rich are richer and our poor are poorer also making any dialog more complex. Admittedly, the clash of various cultural values is a complicated discussion, but to ignore or avoid it is to bury these real differences and promote *misunderstanding*. As a multicultural democracy, we strive for *all* voices to enter into the conversation, for *all* voices to be heard.<sup>30</sup>

Leslie describes how a teacher holding a strong Reggio Image thinks about a child’s misbehavior.

### Learning to change the way you think about the Image of the Child

A colleague on the Reggio online discussion group challenged:

Everything I read on Reggio says, “It starts with the Image of the Child,” so why do we still have children who can’t initiate play, never mind sustain play? Children who have tantrums when they don’t get their way? I’ve even got a child, Mary Jean, who still bites at age four years six months. What about a child who falls off chairs when she is sitting on chairs — never mind letting her stand on them?”

Here’s Leslie’s reply:

By the time Mary Jean has reached four years six months she has chosen many strategies and developed many theories about how to make the world work. Some of her choices are good, and some — including the ones you list — aren’t. But what is clear is that the child is the one making theories and choosing strategies.

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29. This situation is changing as more and more people migrate into the Reggio Emilia area, and it will be interesting to see how the Reggiani deal with newcomers and their children.

30. See Patricia M. Cooper’s excellent book, *The Classrooms all Young Children Need*, about the work of Vivian Gussin Paley. 2009 University of Chicago Press, especially Chapter 5, Race, “Pedagogy, and the Search for Fairness.”

It's very easy to view Mary Jean as strong and competent when she is playing nicely, running well, speaking clearly and listening closely to what's being said to her. It's easy to see her as powerful and competent when she's riding her tricycle or, even better, pulling her friend behind her in a wagon they've tied onto the tricycle.

What's hard is to see Mary Jean as strong, competent and full when she is fussing or kicking another, running away when you've said "come here", mumbling, kissing someone who doesn't want to be kissed, falling down from climbing somewhere we've prohibited climbing, and not paying attention.

Mary Jean is using what she knows from experience to try to solve a problem: *how to initiate play*, or *how to respond when she doesn't get her way*, or *how to express her anger*. Inherent in our positive, strong Image of the Child, is our belief that if she comes to see another solution as better, she will use that instead. If her analysis is undermining her relationships we can be the resource people who supply information about alternative solutions. She will eventually learn to decide if an alternative solution is better than her old one, based on the results it brings her.

We can't hurry this process, since growth takes time, but we can keep on teaching the children, and as they grow to trust us, they will try our ideas on.

Rather than write Mary Jean off, isolating and punishing her as a "behavior problem," we believe in her competence to consider alternatives with us and eventually, we believe, she will implement them.

What happens if we rephrase our colleague's questions, putting the child rather than the behavior at the hub of our thinking? We ask: Who is this child who doesn't initiate play? What does she already believe about initiating play? What does she expect? How can our learning community support and scaffold her into play? What can we share with her parents that will help her?

What purpose does she think dissolving into tantrums will serve? Why does this four-year-old child still bite? What is she trying to communicate? How can I be a resource and support her to *say* what she needs and to behave appropriately? What is this child saying with her behavior when she falls off the chair? How do her parents react when she does these things at home; do they laugh or spank or sometimes laugh and sometimes spank?



This re-framing returns our attention to the unique child in front of us. Our new thinking, resulting from our new Image of the Child, shifts us away from careless or disturbing behaviors and back to our search for this growing child and our positive Image of her. When we do this, we provide children real support.

We believe the Mary Jean behaves as well as she presently can, responding with strategies that seem to her to have worked in the past. If her strategies trouble us or trouble other children, we want to *enlarge the range of alternatives from which our competent child may choose*. We tell a child, “If you hit other children they will not want to play with you. *Tell them* when you don’t like something, and they will listen.” The child may not integrate or act upon this new information immediately, and the others may not always live up to our promise about them, but eventually she will learn to use it to modify her own behavior, because it will help her make friends and be part of our community.

### Listen to children to refine your Image of the Child

As we learn to listen to children, we know we want to adopt something similar to the Reggiani’s belief that children are born strong, competent, full, and more.

It takes time and work to change this fundamental orientation. Change is difficult!

Trying to make ourselves find a way to believe in the strong Image, we practice the new idea, just as Anna, in *The King and I*, practices being unafraid:

*I whistle a happy tune  
And every single time  
The happiness in the tune  
Convinces me that I’m not afraid!*<sup>31</sup>

Helen Dion,<sup>32</sup> a teacher, similarly reports:

*When a child tells me “I can’t do it”  
I find myself telling him or her “pretend you can.”  
They do, and they do it!*

31. Lyric from *The King and I*, by Oscar Hammerstein II.

32. on the Reggio online discussion group, 2000.



## Helping : Caution or challenge?

When children are in conflict, or stumped or at a stalemate, the teacher must consider whether *to support or to challenge them*. You can err on the side of neglect or on the side of too much help, so you're left with the decision: how much help (and what kind) is needed? Should you help at all? In Reggio they offer the *least help that will put the child back into the driver's seat*.

I visited Reggio Emilia in 1992, when they were beginning the Amusement Park for the Birds project.<sup>33</sup> In Giovanni Piazza's studio at La Villetta I watched as he talked with four five-year-old children about their sketches of fountains, and then asked them to take the drawings to the clay table and make those same fountains in clay.

Taking an image from two dimensions to three is difficult, and while the children worked Giovanni stood chatting with me, putting me between him and the children so that while we talked he could keep a close watch on what was going on with them. Periodically, a child looked stumped.

I saw Giovanni wait a minute or so after he perceived the child's frustration, *giving the child time to realize she was stuck*. The first time that happened he got a piece of metal that could support the clay structure, and took it to the child, offering it as a suggestion or challenge to rethink and then leaving the child to her own decision about how to proceed. The second time he went to the child and made a suggestion in words.

He didn't stay with either child long — not more than 90 seconds — but politely offered each one *a possible way out* of a dilemma, and then walked back to me. Clearly he was *offering resources*, not telling the child the one right way to solve her problem.

Learning from Giovanni, a teacher shouldn't exaggerate or minimize the child's issue, but with sensitivity and gentleness choose between the dangerous poles of over-caution and over-challenge — realizing this is always a *choice of error*, choosing one flawed possibility instead of another. Intuition will often show the way out of a stuck place. Sometimes intuition will take the teacher down the wrong road, and she must be ready to acknowledge that to the child: "I made a mistake. Let's put this away, and go outdoors."

This kind of honesty, allowing children to see us as we are, imperfect, but on their side, goes a long way toward establishing a rich classroom, full of people — big and small — who are strong and competent.

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33. Video, Amusement Park for the Birds, 1992.

Available from [http://www.learningmaterialswork.com/store/reggio\\_emilia\\_approach\\_books.html](http://www.learningmaterialswork.com/store/reggio_emilia_approach_books.html)

# CHAPTER 4

## Intention and moral pain

*I reach a hand into the mind of the child, bring out a handful of the stuff I find there, and use that as our first working material. Whether it is good or bad stuff, violent or placid stuff, coloured or dun. To effect an unbroken beginning.*

— Sylvia Ashton-Warner

**A** child flourishes when she expands the range of her understandings and ability to solve the problems that interest her. Perhaps the hardest task adults must accomplish, when learning to think in Reggio terms, is to *uncover, find and follow the intention of the child*. Babies know when they are uncomfortable, and call us to feed, clean, and assist them or allow them to fall asleep. After a while adults want to add their own times and ideas to those of the baby, and if the adults are sensitive, harmony results. Unfortunately, sometimes adults *take over*, ignore the child's signals, substitute their own needs, schedules and wishes, and create frustration and imbalance.

If older infants and children seem ready to play, we're doing well when we initiate play and then go forward if it's well received, or quickly abandon it if the child's not interested. If we plunge forward only because we have the time or the inclination to play — regardless of how this idea is received by the child — our message has become: *I know better than you do, or my ideas are more important than yours*. Humans, including babies, generally don't like this message.

Similarly, despite what everybody thinks, when adults say “children have short attention spans” they are talking about children *who are being asked to attend to things chosen by adults*. A two-year-old on a beach with a pail and shovel lives in joy, outside of time. He will play in the sand with or without your company, as long as you'll permit. Three- or four-year-old children in

the block area or in the dramatic play house are like this too. These children have the attention span an eastern philosopher would envy.

Dr. Malaguzzi said, “the child tosses the ball to us, and we toss it back to him, adding our own interesting resources.” To the extent that we honor this, and also as we listen to Magda Gerber’s wisdom: “Babies know how to be babies,”<sup>34</sup> we can support the child’s intention and help him accomplish his goal. When we think we know better, we’re arrogant, out of touch, and will encounter resistance of many sorts, including that famous, stereotypical “short attention span.”

## Supporting the child’s intention

A child’s enthusiasm might spark an eager teacher to go out and get dozens of props for the classroom. The teacher hears Sally’s fascination with her new puppy and rushes to add bones and dog dishes, stuffed animals and a dog bed to the playhouse in their classroom. Is this response appropriate and proportional? Or, should she first observe to see *what aspects of her dog* are turning Sally on? Early in my teaching I had this tendency to oversupply children — and to supply them too quickly — wanting to cross an item off my list instead of *finding out more* about the kernel of excitement in the relationship of *this child* to *this puppy*. As I continue to study Reggio work, *I have seen the Reggiani take time to examine intention*, and I’ve learned to recommend proceeding much more slowly and cautiously.

## Finding out what children intend

The Reggio-influenced teacher considers what Peter, age 4, is intending to do. She considers her own intentions for Peter, her belief that he needs to trust others more or to speak up for himself more or to extend his passions beyond the block area. How do her ideas meet, connect and merge with his interests? Who are you in the classroom? Can you be authentically you? Can Peter be authentically himself? The teachers we visited in Reggio Emilia had very different styles. These differences in style meant they supported children in particular and different ways in their unique classrooms.

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34. I heard Dr. Elizabeth Jones quote this from Magda Gerber, who taught alongside Jones for many years.

## The image of the teacher

Our new understanding of children means we need to redefine the role of the adult, no longer primarily a transmitter of information — we'll never be as good at that as search engines are. The teacher is no longer the star performer in the classroom, but *instead a facilitator of caring and mindful relationships not only between people, but also between things, between thoughts, and with the environment.* We teachers must see ourselves as researchers and facilitators: able to think, analyze and produce a true curriculum, a curriculum emerging from our own gifts and those of the children. We must not continuously impose adult intentions on the children — impeding them from following their interests and working in their own way — but instead allow children to proceed, creating their theories and testing them, with our help as needed.

No matter how new you may be to teaching, and whether you work with an atelierista or some other collaborator to help you explore children's intentions and theories for their next steps and possible projects, it's crucial that you know what you're asking of children, and that you're clear about how a good classroom climate feels, looks and sounds. When the environment is supportive, comfortable and safe the children can more easily identify their intentions and then find the courage to reveal those intentions to adults. That brings us to the moment when we can be of assistance.

Discovering the children's intention isn't easy — often the children themselves are unclear about what they want or insufficiently articulate to explain it. We have to be patient and respectfully restrained as a child struggles with half-formed ideas, limited vocabulary or immature pronunciation to help us understand what he or she wants. Initial expression of interest in one thing may cloak another.<sup>35</sup>

## Emotions

We can see, in the projects with three- to six-year-olds the Reggioiani have shared with us in their exhibits, talks, videos and publications, that the children are usually driven by strong feelings. In the case of *To Make a Portrait of a Lion*,<sup>36</sup> the children are awed by the king of the beasts, and love his power, his claws and his jaw. In another project<sup>37</sup> the children love the possibility of playing with their shadows, to make them grow or shrink, to try to escape from them. In the *Amusement Park for the Birds*<sup>38</sup> the children shelter and

35. I learned a great deal about this from Pam Oken-Wright. See footnote [page 6](#).

36. Video: *To Make a Portrait of a Lion*, 1957. Available from Reggio Children. <http://www.reggiochildren.org>

37. *Everything Has a Shadow Except Ants*, 1999. Available from Reggio Children.

38. Video: *Amusement Park for the Birds*, 1992. Available from Reggio Children.

entertain the creatures of their meadow, creatures that have entertained and delighted them. Children's best work is driven by important emotional connections. We're looking, when we seek intention, to make sure that whatever we invite them to explore and represent is profoundly connected with their feelings.

The child, from birth, is determined to make sense of his or her world. If we redirect their focus on dressing extravagantly, or teach them to parrot adult values, or see them only as cute, we will undercut their systematic, scientific attempts to understand. We ignore the strong Image of the Child at our peril, (remember Laura in Chapter 3) since we need grounded, competent, compassionate, serious men and women to build our world. Overprotecting and misperceiving children is not the way to nurture skilled, wise, sensitive adults.

### A glimpse of Reggio Emilia projects

I want to describe here, very briefly, two of the many major projects the Reggiani have done with their children and shown to us to exemplify their thinking with, and about, children. Much of what Leslie and I have learned with excitement about how the Reggiani help children explore their intentions and ideas has been learned through studying these projects. You, also, can learn to see what really hearing a child's intention and interest can lead to: often the work of many children for several months.

1. ***To Make a Portrait of a Lion.*** Children studied the stone lion in the market square and some painted, while others drew or sculpted portraits of the lion in bread or clay.

The project took about 8 weeks, and involved measuring, tracing the lion's shadow, studying photos and Tarzan comic books which portrayed lions, walking in front of a projection of a photo of the lion, acting the part of lion and lion-tamer behind a shadow screen, and more. The project ended with a celebration of the lion by the children, marching around the art studio in lion costume.

2. ***The Crowd.*** As the children came back to school after summer vacation they reported that where they'd gone for holiday they had seen crowds. They discussed these crowds at length in same-gender groups. These discussions were recorded and transcribed. Later the children were asked to draw the crowds, and their drawings looked very much like paper dolls, rows of uniform people all facing in the same direction. They were then read the transcript of their conversations, and saw, at once, that many

details of the drawing didn't accurately depict what they had seen and described. The next months of their year were spent exploring how to draw profiles and people seen from above, how to deal with noses (experiments in clay and drawing), considerations of the individuals in a crowd, and many more adventures with demystification of crowds. The project ended with the boys making a crowd in clay — reinventing the assembly line as they worked! — and the girls making another crowd of paper people with a cloud of language overhead (like in comic strips.) You can see these pictures in the catalog of the One Hundred Languages of Children Exhibit, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

These projects exemplify the care and attention to children's intention that supports a child's interest into weeks, and sometimes months, of exploration, representation, conversation and celebration, the general form of a Reggio Emilia project.

## Collaboration

In Italy the atelierista collaborates with the classroom teachers to further the children's intentions by extending the children's ability to express themselves in visual languages: drawing, painting, clay work and any of the other hundred languages. Collaboration among adults stimulates much deeper thinking about children. We'll have a whole chapter on collaboration during the Documentation Process in this book.

## Pain can limit our image

A woman who had taught young children over an eight-year period, repeatedly leaving the field and returning to it, came to study with me. When we considered the documentation she brought with her, I saw that her projects didn't come to glorious conclusions and celebrations, like those in Reggio Emilia. Hers were sometimes unsuccessful and trailed off, leaving me sad. We discussed how she chose projects, and what shapes they took, and I urged her to notice, in documentation from Italy, that *Reggio projects end with a celebration*.

She defended: "Well, what we do in life doesn't always turn out that great." When I probed, she was adamant that children didn't always need their efforts to bear fruit — that the children had to be prepared for the disappointments of life. "I didn't have great outcomes as a child. I'm not sure I can give them to the children I teach, since I didn't experience them myself. I feel somewhat competitive with these children."

I told her, “Indeed, you can rely on life to give them plenty of experience with negative outcomes, but in schools that learn from Reggio we believe ‘Niente senza gioia!’ (Nothing without joy!)”<sup>39</sup> Just as we get chairs that are the right size for the children, make sure the tables are of a height convenient and comfortable for them, we also choose our projects so the children will find out, as the result of their work, what it is like to bring something important to a satisfactory, happy end.<sup>40</sup>

This young woman’s painful past was limiting the possibilities for children in her care to experience working to a meaningful, joyous and satisfying end. It was limiting her ability to imagine endings that would gratify the children and develop their sense of agency. We talked a lot more. I hope she left with the resolve not to bequeath her own negative experiences to these children, but rather to work toward providing children with positive, strong experiences at making good things happen, through their creativity, thought and work (and perhaps to heal herself in that process). If she can not overcome her ambivalence, and find a way to affirm this goal, I think she should work in another field.<sup>41</sup>

## Moral pain and intention

The search for intention is supported by an understanding of Moral Pain, a concept I learned from Selma Wassermann.<sup>42</sup> It’s what you feel when you *believe one thing and find yourself doing another*, doing something different, something that conflicts with your belief. It can happen when you hear yourself sounding like your mother at her worst, or when your boss or the law demands you must do a kind of teaching that you feel wastes time and destroys good relationships — a kind of teaching you believe is harmful to children. When what you believe and what you do are different, the tension between those two things is Moral Pain. A colleague reminds me that it also causes Moral Pain when she *doesn’t do* something she feels she should be doing.

Parents, teachers and administrators in this country often have very different cultural backgrounds from each other and therefore find themselves in conflict about values. Since Italy has been, traditionally, much more monocultural (though there is more diversity there in recent years), the community and government there are on the same side as the teachers, parents, children and administrators. In Italy community-wide consensus supports the schools

39. The words inscribed over the door of Diana School in Reggio Emilia.

40. Leslie’s project in 2011, exploring three different aspects of the beach, strikes me as a perfect Reggio project choice, since children are almost always very happy at the beach. To see Leslie’s work at Mid-Pacific Institute go to: <http://www.midpac.edu/elementary/PG/archives.php>.

41. As you continue to read this book, note the many places where I discuss *agency*.

42. See Wassermann’s books in the bibliography.



we're discussing. The Reggio community has been working on this difficult accomplishment since their schools began in 1945.<sup>43</sup> Our North American context is quite different, but optimism leads us to seek ways to cultivate a new, strong Image of the Child to benefit our children and our community.

As much as I could, from the beginning of my work as a teacher, I would search for ways to change things so as to make my Moral Pain go away. If I found myself fussing at the children before lunch (I don't like to think of myself fussing at children) I changed what we did at that time to something children liked better — of course, it worked! My friends who are still teaching in public schools under the restrictions of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are asked to do many things each day (prepare children for tests, emphasize phonics instead of understanding texts, and more) that they feel are wrong for children and themselves. Their Moral Pain is enormous.

As learners we struggle to acknowledge the gulf between *what I know is right* and *what I do*, and then to reduce that gulf. An inch closer, a mile closer — the closer the better — how great a change I can afford to make depends on my situation.

Examine your present life circumstances. For example: If you're a single parent and not independently wealthy, you can't afford to lose or risk your job. You know where the boundary is, and you don't dare to cross it now, so you will need to compromise, once or repeatedly — yet *always remember to call it a compromise*. You must *always* file these under "C" for Compromises and never under "R" for Right. It is possible that there will come a day when your children are grown, and you have a measure of security, when opportunity and circumstance will allow you to do what you believe in. You must always keep yourself ready to move to what you know to be right. In the meantime, *double track*, do what you have to do now, while thinking: "If I had the freedom I deserve and used it well, how would I *choose* to do this?"

You're in danger if you find yourself moving from "I don't believe in that," to "It's all right because I have to do it to keep my job." You will want to remember a choice you made *against* your beliefs, and that your choice was a compromise. Otherwise, *what had been a painful choice becomes standardized, justified and unquestioned*. We must not allow this creeping legitimization of compromises. You're on solid ground if you persevere in telling yourself, "I am compromising. This is the best I can do right now. I'll keep searching for a way to end this compromise, as my life continues and changes. (Have I inherited money? Is my significant other making enough money so I can now

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43. There is also a Roman Catholic childcare program in Reggio Emilia, with a different culture, but not part of this discussion.



afford to speak out? Have we paid off the mortgage?) I'll always be looking at how to escape from compromise and act on my own core beliefs.”



## CHAPTER 5

### Integrated learning

UNESCO<sup>44</sup> reviewed early childhood policies and practices in developed countries.<sup>45</sup> Two of their observations strongly remind us of beliefs held in Reggio Emilia:

- The quality and effectiveness of programs do not depend entirely on wealth — some rich countries have poor systems and services — but on *the vision* that a country has for its children, backed by sound government planning, financing, and policy-making.
- There is a temptation to turn early childhood services into junior schools. Preparation for school is necessary, but research shows that *didactic classrooms* do *not* support effectively the *holistic development* of young children, in particular *their creative capacities*, and their *socio-emotional* and *physical development*.

Our Image of the Child is reflected in the questions that we pose, in our choices of materials, how we frame our day, our interactions with parents and in the design of our classroom and outdoor environments.

In this country children are seen as consumers from birth. Their environment has been distorted by over-stimulating, branded, commercial interests. There are many examples, Disney™ and other licensed characters and logos, which disfigure walls, rugs, backpacks, lunch boxes, tee shirts and notebooks. The children's world is cheapened by ugly, jazzy letters or numbers or animals

44. *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.*

45. UNESCO Policy Brief on Early Childhood #26, Bennett, John. Curriculum in Early Childhood Education and Care September 2004.

or anything salable and yet deemed instructive. A deluge of commercials urges children to get their parents to purchase action figures from each new TV show. Many schools have found they need rules to keep the action figures and other commercial toys out.

A different aesthetic is found in Reggio, where calm, beautiful, descriptive documentation reflecting the children's work adorns classroom walls. Spaces there have visual appeal and sophisticated design elements are integrated into their décor. Rooms there are highly functional. They support children's play and learning yet are uncluttered and very beautiful. Italy is, after all, a world leader in design.

## Learning in context

In Reggio Emilia the adults aren't worried about *preparing* children for the next school or achieving high scores on tests. Instead they concentrate on providing the best for *today's* child. They expect young children to learn in *integrated* ways, as young children have learned best throughout history. For example, if a worksheet is used to teach a child the letter "c" you have taken "c" out of context, and *dis-integrated* it. On the other hand, if four-year-old Sarah learns to recognize the names of the people she loves, then the letter "c" arises as part of Carol, and becomes an icon steeped in the feelings Sara has for Carol, integrating the letter "c" into her life. In the story below you'll see how strongly possessive five-year-old Daryl felt about the letters in his name.

## Kites, poetry and editing: Daryl's own letters

After a wonderful excursion to the beach with my grandson Daryl to fly a kite for the first time, I showed him a poem, neatly printed in large type:

### KITE DAYS

By Mark Sawyer

*A kite, a sky,  
and a good firm breeze,  
Acres of ground  
away from trees,  
One hundred yards  
Of clean, strong string  
O boy, o boy!  
I call that Spring!*

Daryl, who had just had his fifth birthday a week before, wasn't happy with the letters in the word *Days* — three of those letters were too invasively close to his *own* name, his own special letters. Seeing his letters used differently disturbed him. We discussed this briefly, and I said something grownup and placating about how the same letters get used over and over many times in many different words.

We read and joked and learned the poem, and then I said “But Daryl, we weren't on acres of *ground*, you know, we were on. . .”

“Sand,” he chirped.

I said, “Let's change the poem to say ‘Acres of sand’”. He agreed, so I got a pen and crossed out *ground* and wrote *sand*. Then he said, “Grandma, let's change this,” as he pointed to *Days*, the word that had misappropriated his letters. “Let's make it say Kite Spring.”

Then we went to the computer and fixed the whole thing up. And that's how Daryl learned to edit, learned that text was changeable! Just as I wanted the poem to reflect our reality at the beach, he didn't want his letters usurped, so we changed the text, making it work for us both!

### KITE SPRING

By Mark Sawyer

Revised by Daryl Carl Dancy & Sydney Gurewitz Clemens

*A kite, a sky,  
And a good firm breeze,  
Acres of sand  
away from trees,  
One hundred yards  
Of clean, strong string  
O boy, o boy!  
I call that Spring!*

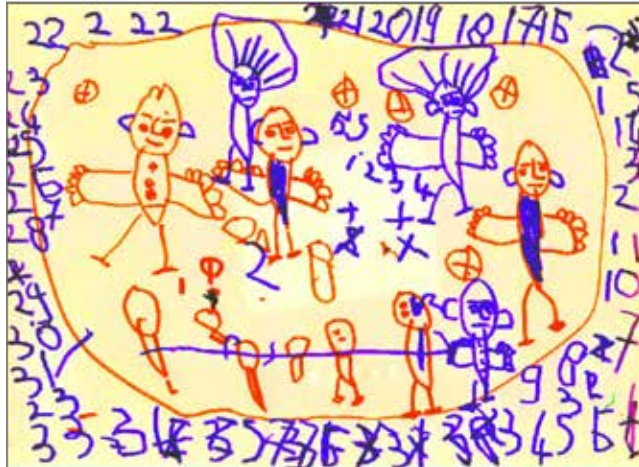
We do well to use children's intense feelings to fuel their explorations and expression!<sup>46</sup>

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46. The story about Daryl and kites was first published in a slightly different form in *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Volume 1, Number 1, as part of an article called “Editing: Permission to Start Wrong” <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v1n1/clemens.html>

## The Image of the Young Child and expressive literacy

In Reggio Emilia the children often dictate what they want to write, an adult acts as scribe, writing down their words, and then the children copy what the adult wrote. Children also need letters during other work and they are supplied, *always* in context. On my last day in Italy I watched as a class of four-year-olds at Pablo Neruda school made drawings as gifts for me to take home, and, among many themes (flags, flowers, people, animals, beach) a couple of the children were fascinated by letters and numbers:



Filippo's drawing

You can see that Filippo is thinking about number and sequence: the numerals start in the lower right-hand corner and go up counterclockwise to 33 (in several progressions).

Here, also, are two drawings by Deborah, who wasn't exactly making letters yet, but was showing an enormous readiness for writing.



Deborah's first drawing

Deborah's rows are both iconic and progressively changing. I feel that they are to be read from left to right, particularly because of the red sun in the

fifth row, drawing the eye to the left. The top row, starting with recognizable flowers or trees, becomes more and more abstract; the progression is sophisticated. In the drawing below we see another set of messages going across the paper. These children are practicing to be writers, not because they're under pressure from the adults at their school, but because being able to write gives you power!



Deborah's second drawing

These children drew patterns (we can discern no words) just letters, numerals, and symbols, organized in lines the way they are in books, even using different fonts! In Reggio classrooms, the children's names are all displayed in lists (with photos) so children can look up their own names, as well as those of their classmates, and as part of a system of *mailboxes* where one can leave a small gift or picture for a classmate or teacher.



Here are two more special pictures from 1992. Both are by Matteo. He made this charming picture first:



Matteo's first drawing

When I had admired it (Matteo knows he's good!) he asked me, through a teacher-interpreter, if I was very brave. I said that I was, and so he made the next picture:



Matteo's drawing for a visitor determined to be brave

It was a privilege to get to know these children a little bit, and to be given their work, which reveals substance and care on the part of the artists.

On the reverse side of his scary drawing, Matteo dedicated it to me. He was the only four-year-old who did, although many wrote their names, including Filippo, but not Deborah. Here is Matteo's writing:



The back of Matteo's drawing

I was also given pictures with writing on the reverse by the fives.

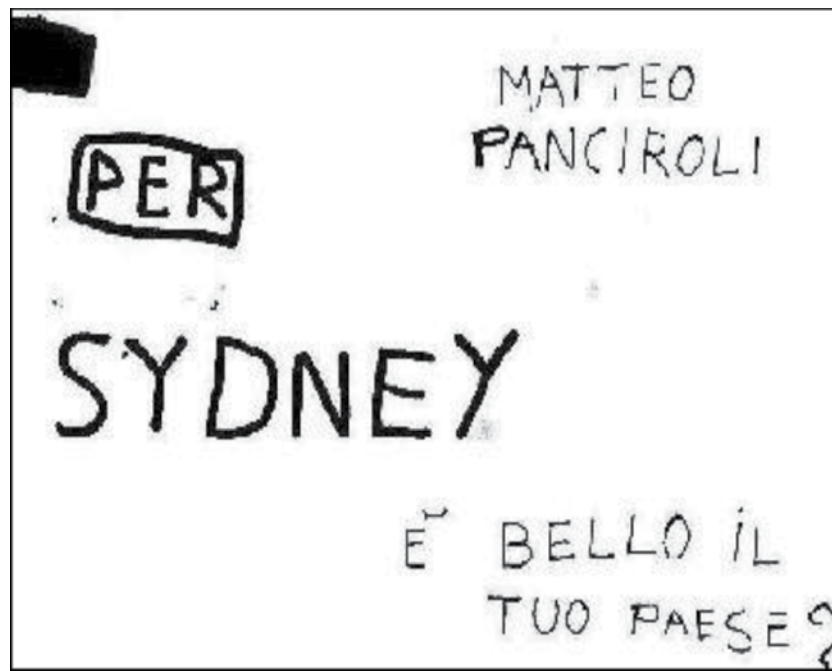
Here's a taste:



Daniele's drawing

Daniele was copying my name from my business card. He also copied my zip code!





This child, a different Matteo, asks, “Is your country beautiful?”

Reggio teachers don't ask us to replicate, imitate or in any way copy their work, but they spend time and energy sharing their work with us with the intention of inspiring and provoking us to *advance our own work*. As we study their work we supply our children with resources generated by our particular local culture and community. The only “Reggio schools” are in Reggio Emilia. There are many schools elsewhere that claim to be “Reggio” schools, but they aren't; they can *learn* from Reggio Emilia, but they must attempt to serve their own communities as faithfully as the Reggiani do. Our work can be inspired and informed by theirs, but unless we're Italian and work in their city we will have forsaken *the very authenticity they exemplify* if we try to clone their work.

We saw Leslie becoming more like her best self when she left the curriculum she inherited and considered each part of her day, thinking out the reasons for what she offered the children. She scrutinized circle time, lunchtime, the children's work time, arrivals — every single element! Appointments between children and teachers should change and re-group as the classroom community changes, as the children become better able to do things independently and as mindful teachers question, wonder, and reflect on each engagement. Thinking critically about the needs and wishes of your own unique group of people — instead of following an externally mandated plan — is a crucial element of learning from Reggio Emilia.

# CHAPTER 6

Interlude: Two small lessons from Vygotsky

## LOVE THE QUESTIONS

I want to beg you as much as I can...  
to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart  
and to try to love the questions themselves...  
Do not now seek answers which cannot be given you  
because you would not be able to live them.  
And the point is to live everything.  
Live the questions now.  
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it,  
live along some distant day into the answer.

— Ranier Marie Rilke

From *Letters to a Young Poet*

**Lesson one:** Vygotsky and Velcro™

**Experience must be present for the learner to integrate new information**

Vygotsky teaches us that experience needs to be present for *new information* to connect and hold. I like to use the image of Velcro,™ consisting of two parts, hooks and loops — which, when joined together create a strong bond. Vygotsky teaches us that *experience* (the loops) needs to connect with *new information* (the hooks) for learning to take place.

A child who has not traveled and seen mountains cannot think of them as snowcapped or bare, as having a tree line or being used for skiing. If she has read books about mountains she may have an inkling of what they are, but nothing duplicates the real-life experience of walking and breathing in real

mountains. The *experience* part of the Velcro™ is absent. There is nothing to put snow on, plant trees on, or to ski upon. Teachers often make the mistake of teaching lessons on subjects some children haven't experienced.

When we want to add new information and resources to what the children know, we have learned from Vygotsky's research to first ascertain that they *have* a base of experience — or we must provide those experiences ourselves. When we are sure of that base of experience we can offer a lesson that connects with it.

In Reggio Emilia the children are sometimes given experiences so that learning can be attached to those experiences, however, children more frequently describe or indicate their experiences, and the adults find and select many provocations, ideas and things to connect to them. With Velcro™, you need both parts — the hooks and the loops — to make the bond; similarly in learning, relating *new* material to *existing* experience is vital to success. Long ago I had to teach children to read from an illustrated phonics text which used the word *lids* to teach the short *i* sound. The text, from England, assumed the learner would say “lid” when they saw a picture of one. Based on their New York City cultural experience, the children in my class would sensibly have said *top* or *cap*, neither of which would demonstrate the short *i* sound the page was teaching. The book would have worked better for these children had it used *pin* to teach short *i*, — everyone would have recognized it.

The children were being misled by the pictures in the textbook, which had been casually chosen for American children despite the inclusion of *lid* and *cot* (for *crib*) and other such cultural language differences. It made learning harder for the children, since they had no familiarity (experience) on which to base further learning.

Once I recognized that the children didn't know some words the book used, I made a point, early in the year, of using the word *lid* repeatedly as we put tops on boxes and jars. Having heard the word *before* they encountered it in their book, when they saw the picture, the word *lid* could occur to them. Now their experience allowed them to use the word *lid* comfortably in their reading lessons. It was harder to do this with *cot*, since Americans use *crib* for the baby bed shown in the workbook, and *cot* for a temporary or minimal bed. I just told the children “Where this book was made, they call a crib a ‘cot’.”

We must be sure that we understand this intimate relationship between experience and learning, if we're to develop a full, strong, Image of the Child.

## Lesson two: The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Background: Before we'd heard of Vygotsky, whose work was suppressed during the years when he wrote it, Piaget told us that children couldn't learn things until the children were at the right stage, and that stages couldn't be forced to come sooner. This was unsettling to teachers since we like to proactively give a child something new, and not to wait until some ambiguous interval elapses.

Vygotsky's work (which is highly regarded in Reggio Emilia) agrees that stages are, as Piaget taught us, not to be hurried, but he pointed out there is a period — during each stage — when the child approaches the next stage and becomes able to *borrow expertise* from an adult or a more skilled peer, and use what is shared by this expert so that the child can more comfortably operate in the stage she's about to enter. Vygotsky called this readiness period in advance of a next developmental stage, “the zone of proximal development (ZPD).”<sup>47</sup> He wrote:

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.

When his teacher sees Bobby struggling with a task he can't do alone, awareness of the Zone of Proximal Development encourages the teacher to ask Bobby questions or offer him examples and assistance, so as to empower and enable *his* learning. Thus, she builds a scaffold he can step out onto while he's making his discoveries.

The scaffold, the shared expertise from an adult or skilled peer, helps Bobby do things *with others* that he can't yet do *alone*. His teacher or more skilled peer fills in with focused questions, targeted guidance, or other resources so he can succeed at this task.

Dr. Malaguzzi taught us that openness to curriculum that responds to the ideas of the people in the room “goes to undermine the role of the teacher. It makes the role of the teacher more complex and more beautiful and the teacher can become more involved. It calls for a different kind of formation of teachers than we're used to in preservice teacher training.”<sup>48</sup>

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47. L.S. Vygotsky: *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, 1978 p. 86.

48. This quotation is from a draft I received at a workshop. It became the Child Care Information Exchange article: *Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins* in the March, 1994 issue.

I suspect that, for example, most lessons about the alphabet (other than the Alphabet Song) are out of the ZPD of many children in kindergarten. Words, unlike single letters, aren't. That's why Ashton-Warner<sup>49</sup> built on each child's vital, unique, existing vocabulary. As the teacher, together with the child, identifies the child's own important word (like a Velcro™ loop), the teacher writes that word in large letters and the word hooks onto that existing important experience. She bonds the written words to ones the children already value. This connection with the child's interests results in the success of her method, while often the "letter of the week" and phonics lessons (using *lid* — in place of *top* for meaning or in place of *pin* for sound) fly beyond the children. The concept of the need for a base in experience, coupled with an understanding of the ZPD, helps teachers shift from simply *delivering* packaged lessons and advancing pre-determined curriculum, to *designing* lessons that meet the needs of their particular children. A capable teacher checks to be sure experience is present, and then figures out the means to help a child across the scaffold to new understanding.

We find the ZPD idea extremely helpful both in describing interventions that make sense to children, and in helping adults back off when they aren't getting anywhere (when the child hasn't arrived at the Zone). Our awareness necessarily shifts from dismissing the child — this child isn't ready to learn this material, or worse, this child is stupid, — to, *I must have misperceived this child's ZPD, or can I think of other ways to scaffold?* The solution to the problem of *when to offer what* is determined by the teacher's ability to accurately discover the learning behavior of the child at the present time and accurately assess the child's ability to work with assistance. The ability to be accurate here grows with a teacher's consciousness, collaboration and practice; alas, there's no shortcut.

Dr. Malaguzzi spoke about "The strange devaluation of the role of the adult."<sup>50</sup>

Many early childhood teachers were taught to intervene rarely or never, if no mayhem was being committed and no health rules were being broken. The reading of Piaget that was given to many of us in college or graduate school taught us that *staying out until the child was ready* was all we could do, and that we might actually do harm if we tried to teach children things before they were ready for them. This made for a pedagogy of benign neglect.

As we learn from Vygotsky we are freed to try to erect some scaffolding and bring a child along onto the scaffold, believing he or she is nearly ready to

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49. See Clemens, *Pay Attention to the Children: Lessons for Teachers and Parents from Sylvia Ashton-Warner*, 1996. And Ashton-Warner's book, *Teacher*.

50. Edwards, *Hundred Languages of Children*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Page 68.

take on a task of the next stage. On the scaffold the child can borrow our skill (or, better, the skill of a classmate) and continue along in an area that interests her, despite being unready to manage this task alone.

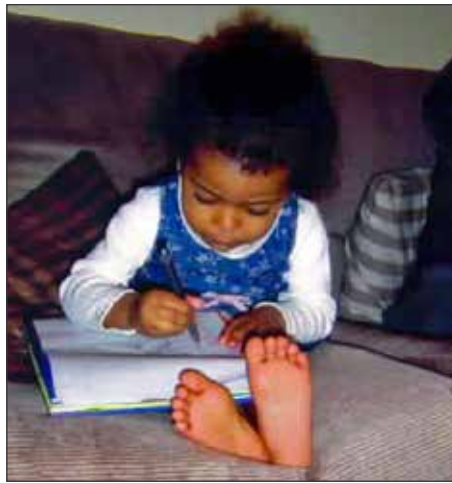
I have always liked showing people how to do something, and Vygotsky gave me approval for that, helping me find new energy in my teaching.

What is the role of the Vygotskian early childhood teacher?

If we are to follow Dr. Malaguzzi's advice to abandon certainty — the idea that we already know what's there — then, liberated by Vygotsky's thinking, we will become great explorers, detectives and archeologists, trying to uncover what's really there. We look for the children's intentions, provide them a full spectrum of resources, and become architects and engineers (planners and designers) who find space and provisions for their designs and constructions. This truly helps them develop the dispositions and skills they need to get the results they want.

We learn from the children, from our colleagues and friends and from our whole community as we explore collaboratively, thinking about what the children's behavior might be telling us. We try *many* things, hoping that what we try will move us in the direction of helping the children with their intentions, and we will sometimes succeed. We will learn from our errors, and search, not for new certainties, but for new ways of *exploring and understanding*, leading to new ways of assisting capable, rich, thoughtful children's explorations.

Vygotsky has explained why Reggio works so well: connecting curriculum to the child who is present ensures that the loops and hooks will connect and the information and ideas that come up in this connected context will support the child's growth and development. As Nobel Laureate Henri Bergson said, "The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend."



## CHAPTER 7

### Tossing out the old lens and constructing a new narrative

The Reggioiani tell us, with emphasis, “*ALL children are BORN powerful and competent.*” As a teacher changes her Image of the Child — it follows that just about everything else — tone, pacing, use of space, relationships and curriculum — will change as a result.

There is ample data to support the idea that children work hard to make sense of their world beginning at birth. In Chapter 2 we saw Laura at 12 months 8 days making and testing her hypothesis about ticking watches.<sup>51</sup> Older children do the same thing, if they’re not discouraged from it. Every day, in any infant-toddler setting we can see a three-month-old baby working on the problem of how to get her hand into her mouth. She fumbles, practices, and finally succeeds, much as we older people practice and eventually succeed at our enterprises. Later that year we will see her struggle to stand, falling and trying again and again.

#### Robert finds speech

Leslie remembers: I was observing and documenting another child when Robert, who is autistic, came to a nearby table. I had never heard Robert say a word. Now he picked up a scanner toy — attached by a cord to a toy cash register — and held it to his ear. He looked as if he was listening to a telephone. I wondered if he was, in his silent way, pretending to talk on the phone. Would he let me enter his world? I picked up a toy phone, looked squarely at him, and said, “Hello.” Robert looked at me, grinned, and hung up his “phone.”

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51. See page 14.



I watched and waited, ready for his next move. I believed the grin meant he was interested in what I had done. When he picked it up again and put it to his ear, I said, “Hello” again, and this time he replied, “Hello” before he put the phone down. I gasped in excitement, since this was the very first time this child had said a word I could understand!

He picked up his phone again. This time *he* said “Hello” *first!* I replied “Hello.” Now he grinned and paused and mouthed something I couldn’t understand. Then, with some difficulty, he said “Bye.” Seeing my surprise Robert giggled and grinned, and then, with me following his lead, we repeated and repeated our hello and goodbye game. The children and I applauded, “Oh, Robert, you can talk!” 🌀

## Time to reflect

Information moves fast and disappears rapidly in an early childhood classroom. Part of learning to be a good observer is managing the rapid stream of information *to permit reflecting on our observations*. The documentation process is the tool which provides the structure and format for that learning. The next section of our book is about that process.

Dr. Malaguzzi tells us:

Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning,  
observe carefully what children do, and then,  
if you have understood well,  
perhaps your teaching will be different from before.<sup>52</sup>

Through observing closely and being open to new possibilities, *by taking time to reflect on what we’re doing*, we increase our own competence. *We must abandon the idea that we already know what is here*. What we know is *influenced, bounded and constrained by our past experiences*, and today’s new experiences give us fresh data to process, and what we see this afternoon may challenge what we believed this morning. Thinking all the time takes work, but it sharpens and develops insight — something every good teacher needs.

## Leslie and I have different learning styles

Leslie is primarily a visual learner. One definition of *Image* is “a visible impression obtained by a camera or other device or displayed on a screen.” She recalls:

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52. In Edwards, Gandini & Forman, *One Hundred Languages of Children*, 1998.



As I slowed down I began to observe closely and absorb details of learning that were revealed and captured through the lens of my still camera. I made photo essays of the daily work of children in the classroom, and began to see learning *unfolding* through photos and words — the powerful and competent child became visible. Adding video enabled me, frame-by-frame, to see children more distinctly, and over time I became skilled at seeing the children *construct* their knowledge. LG

I am an auditory learner, a word person, learning mostly through what I hear and read. Images are not easy for me to understand quickly. I've known this for a long time, and so, trying to expand my ways of understanding, I took a lot of photographs of the children I taught and used them in many ways in my long-ago teaching before I'd heard about Reggio Emilia.

Understanding that most people *are* visual, I gave each child a box with a few photographic transparencies (slides) of him- or herself to project with our ancient one-slide-at-a-time machine in our room, to see their beautiful selves projected onto a wall, big, bold and gorgeous. Children really liked this, and I thought it added to their sense of their own beauty and intelligence. I always photographed them when they were working or playing in ways that moved or impressed me, hoping the pictures reflected a positive, strong image to them.



Hazel projects her slides in my classroom, 1982

I sent some photos home with the children, and put some on the classroom walls, but, since I depend so much on words, I didn't realize yet *how much story could be told in pictures*. For many years my way of learning to understand children was to write down what they said and did — reviewing the day and planning the next with my assistant after the children went home.<sup>53</sup>

What did we write that grew us as teachers, before we'd heard the Reggiani's ideas about the documentation process? We wrote about the things that troubled us, trying to accurately describe behavior while avoiding judgment; leaving the guesses and theories until later, when we could review *all* the data we had collected, linking it with other information about a specific child to modify an old understanding or create a new perspective.

Sometimes we wrote down what children said — exactly the way they said it — including errors, confusions, cutenesses and even nonsense. We speculated about what all this meant, and included our theories and questions. I often wrote down what I *saw* when I couldn't hear the words (from across the school yard or across the classroom) looking carefully at what children did with their bodies, how they achieved satisfactions, whom they approached and how, and how they were treated by others when they approached them. Watching them I tried to educate myself about nonverbal communication and body language. I wrote about the way a child entered the classroom in the morning.<sup>54</sup> I wrote about whether the child went willingly or not if picked up before it was time to go home, and how the children greeted or ignored those who arrived, timely or late, at day's end to take them home.

Amazing things are recorded in my teaching journals. For instance, after five-year-old Marcie met my friend Tom *only once in January*, when he returned unannounced to help me with something in September, Marcie greeted him, casually, by name! More often we recorded the everyday miracles that happen as four-year-olds learn: when a child mastered the low-to-the-ground two-wheeler (amazingly, every year they all did!) or succeeded, after many tries, at tying her shoelaces. How the children cheered as we celebrated their friends' triumphs!

## Media helps with our development

There are many ways to collect data: still or video camera, audio recorder, or simply writing on paper. Whatever media we use for collecting data, Leslie and I agree that using media supports reflection on our practice, and that

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53. You can read more about logging in Clemens, *The Sun's Not Broken, A Cloud's Just in the Way*.

54. I came to believe that a kind, empathetic, perceptive greeting by an adult at the school could absolutely make a day better for a sensitive child. I learned a lot from Teacher Aide Katherine Primes, who knew exactly how to make a child and parent feel welcome on arrival.

*reflection* is what has improved and continues to improve us as teachers. Review and reflection is a vital, necessary part of teaching, and the work you do to become better at thinking and analyzing your initial perceptions will reward you ten thousand-fold. As documentation tools we use improve, they help us become better at reflection because we capture, retrieve, and use more data in easier and more user-friendly ways.

My friend and colleague Toni Gross<sup>55</sup> resisted using a tape recorder for years after she first heard about it (in our San Francisco Reggio Learning Group) as a documentation tool. On the very first day she used the recorder, setting it near two large pieces of driftwood (new material she had provided to the children in the block corner) two girls rushed over to the driftwood and the tape recorder caught one saying to the other: “Let’s pretend we’re God, and build a world.”

What an important insight Toni got into the workings of this child’s mind! The idea she explored was spectacular. What was even more informative was to hear the completely unequal contributions the children made as they played. The girl who thought of the idea truly played God and didn’t let the other get a word in edgewise. The other girl tried unsuccessfully to contribute and eventually drifted away and played her own parallel game. Even though these things actually happened (as so much does) out of Toni’s hearing as she attended to other things in her classroom, Toni received satisfying, important understandings of both content and social interaction, simply by listening to the tape recorder she set out with the driftwood.

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55. Toni is co-author with Sydney of the article *Painting a Tragedy*, published in *Young Children* (May 2002) and available as a pdf file at Sydney’s website: [www.eceteacher.org](http://www.eceteacher.org)

# CHAPTER 8

## Changing the Image of the Child in this country

*Children have wonderful ideas, often large, often intricate. What if, we ask, children were to hold on to those ideas, to believe that no matter how great or reaching the ideas, they could be made visible?*

— Pam Oken-Wright

Since 2002, when the No Child Left Behind law was passed, American teachers have been mandated to follow scripts found in teacher's manuals that accompany textbooks, and to test children with standardized tests several times each year. Practically, this means teaching only the "official" text without veering from what is prescribed.<sup>56</sup> People in early childhood education (ECE) who teach in pre-school programs are affected by the change in expectations of children about to enter Kindergarten, and people in ECE who teach kindergarten, first, or second grade are swept up in the mania for testing and pulled away from the real job, helping young children to grow and learn in ways that interest them and serve the community, to focus on "their creative capacities and their socio-emotional and physical development."

It will take lots of love and courage and political wit to induce our politicians to change these policies which utterly fail to acknowledge the uniqueness of each child. Our ability to effect this change will come as a result of looking with open hearts at children, parents and teachers, listening to them, and exchanging learning. Then we must find a way to convey changes that are needed to those who make policy. Action based on what our heightened consciousness and close observation show us will result in changes that benefit children and schools.

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56. See the rigid *No Child Left Behind* legislation. And see Susan Ohanian's very informative webpage for ongoing critique of NCLB.  
<http://www.susanoonian.org>

The Reggiani talk about the three “subjects of education” — children, teachers and parents — and it is generally safe to assume that most teachers and parents there share similar values and goals for their children. However, talking about education in North America we must closely analyze the more complex relationships among these three groups because of our multi-class, multi-ethnic, diverse country. It is not only risky to assume, in the United States, that parents and teachers hold similar values, but it is often the case that they hold *opposing* values.

## Questions to consider

What happens to this “subjects of education” triangle in the USA? Who takes responsibility for what? How does the struggle for respect look? Does it result in less dignity and autonomy for children and for their families? It often does. Are you focusing your teaching on making children independent or interdependent? Do their parents share your focus?

## A dialectic of trust

I read the phrase “a dialectic of trust” in the late ‘90s somewhere in Jack Zipes’s<sup>57</sup> writing. It has often resonated in me since. I think it describes what is present in Reggio Emilia schools in the best relationships between adults there, and what is often absent in ours.

A dialectic is a tug-of-war between people who disagree, and what is called for in a dialectic of *trust* is that each person respects that *the other person is also the sum of his or her own experiences*. With this attitude, differences don’t result in silences, angers, bitterness, and resentments. Mutual trust is necessary.

The value placed on *disagreement* in Reggio is as great as that placed on agreement in most North American communities. In Reggio the *creative possibilities of conflict* are embraced and celebrated. They don’t believe that one right answer, one right curriculum, one right method exists. They often say, “It depends.” Learning from them we see with new eyes, and our choices depend on how well we explore and understand our community’s context, and search among the alternatives we find there — alternatives sometimes in conflict. The research we do leads us to begin to attempt one direction, and then to try others, and to consider and evaluate what each direction might bring.

We learn things inside relationships with other people (parents and teachers who either do or don’t tell us the truth, siblings, grandparents and sometimes

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57. Zipes translated Gianni Rodari’s *A Grammar of Fantasy*, a compilation of speeches Rodari gave in Reggio Emilia, about how children (and adults) can make fantasy stories — since stories are made up of other stories. See Chapter 50.

even characters in novels or plays.) We learn and teach everything through *relationship*, and we do it best when the relationship is *trusting*. Only after you and I give each other some trust can we work well together.

With trust it is possible to discuss a difference and agree to explore it further, with each party listening closely and trying to bridge the gap, a kind of back and forth and zigzagging dialog between two people with two perspectives. For example, a difference about the role of holidays in the school, about whether or not to have caps and gowns for preschool graduation, about phonics, school uniforms, school lunches, war play. That zigging and zagging, that examination and discussion of the range of alternative choices — the various routes to a destination — that's the 'dialectic' part. Each person explains his or her idea, and listens respectfully to the other's different ideas *and their reasons*. And in the process of talking and listening, they agree to differ and to disagree *without animosity*. And then they make a plan which, because of mutual respect, can succeed.

Successful engagement in this process is based on believing that you *both* want what's best for children, that your experience and truth and the other's are both valuable and worth considering. It's the realization and trust that complicated problems do not have simple solutions and that *you will still be friendly after the discussion*.

There's an old Yiddish expression, "In every argument, both sides are right." When all have listened and all have heard the many perspectives possible, the decisions we forge, together, are stronger than those that result from a power struggle.

Why do the Reggiani have this trust? Why do so many of us lack it? Every difference — race, class, nationality, gender — can either stimulate this kind of negotiation or stifle it. We have different histories and appearances, we have different styles and gifts. We're okay if the other person still recognizes what we have in common, knowing I am committed to children in most ways that matter to her. Similarly I know she is committed to the children in most ways that matter to me. We may diverge in detail or in method. When we discover a divergence, we are interested in it. The process can be difficult, but we explore to find something better for the children we care for. Mutual respect continues. Sometimes one of us modifies her opinion, sometimes both do, sometimes neither does, but with time the problem resolves, sometimes to where one or the other of us started, sometimes to a third alternative. Whatever the outcome, we find the *process* worthwhile. Neither of us needs to be defensive (and if defensive feelings arise we work through them). Excellent work is what matters, and we search for ways to accomplish it. As

George Bernard Shaw said: “If you have an apple and I have an apple then you and I will still each have one apple. *But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas!*”

The perspective of each strengthens the knowledge base of the other. How is it that some people can do this with each other, while many others can't? Why are people territorial? Why do they see a different “take” on a subject as a threat? Why are some adults apparently unconcerned with making sense of the children's perspective? Why do some teachers and parents always cling to what they have been doing, *pot roast* unwilling or unable to think in terms of *children and their needs*, and modify what they do based on that analysis? Why are so many early childhood work situations characterized by rule-making and coercion rather than by problem solving? Why so many instances of resistance and passive-aggressive behavior, or worse, apathy?

We have no illusions that it will be easy to answer these hard questions. But if we don't work together, if we don't learn from each other and help each other improve our work, we cannot rise to the level of extraordinary competence we see in the Reggio Emilia programs in Italy. How can we make each other secure and safe enough to do the job we set out to do for the children?

### Sharing the Image: What can we do about resistance

We are often asked, “What if in your own teaching team or school, the Image of the Child adults hold is not one of complete competence? How do you help others construct a strong Image of the Child, one that allows teachers to trust the children?”

As a consultant, without the direct power of a supervisor or center director, I've certainly run into people in my professional development work who indicated that they have little interest in learning any more. My response is to focus my work on those who *are* interested in what I'm offering and to curtail my attention to people who are indifferent.

In my two decades of teaching about Reggio, I've seen a variety of types of resistance, even in those people who are committed to learning more about it. One colleague repeatedly gathers data and then abandons documentation. She hasn't found the rhythm of the Documentation Process; she isn't recycling what she learns from data into her teaching. She only makes the effort when she's collaborating with a young teacher she mentors, but not simply for herself and the children.



Another colleague doesn't save documentation panels, or even her files, as if they were only for a single use, and wouldn't be helpful or informative later. Yet another colleague shares only baby steps in documentation, for fear colleagues will be overwhelmed. Another always leaps ahead to describe the desired outcome, instead of methodically noticing and sharing the steps along the path.

We cannot force others to accept the Image of the Child as the Reggiani present it to us. We can, however, keep on documenting children's many capabilities and strengths to others, hoping those resisting people will, sooner or later, become aware of the new Image and want to act on that new vision. We have a responsibility to share with our colleagues. Some will be envious, like the colleague I had who, at the end of each school year, would always ask me a version of the question: "*Sydney, how come you always get the good artists?*" She couldn't recognize that the children in my afternoon class hadn't come to the school as good artists, but had become good artists because we gave them *time to draw and paint and work in clay every day*, unlike her morning class where art was occasional and product-oriented.<sup>58</sup> Some of our colleagues will not think Reggio ideas worth the bother, but others will find them interesting, and begin their own journey.

### Leslie writes about using documentation to help others "get it"

We can't spend time and energy worrying about changing others but we can hope that as others observe us and our work, their curiosity — about what it is that makes our children so very competent, so interested in life, so full of wonder and joy — may lead them in this new direction. Documentation panels<sup>59</sup> you make will influence people who read what you've posted to change their understanding and begin to shift their Image of the Child.

If I am in a leadership position with teachers who don't see, acknowledge and act based on children's competence, then I see my role as one of seeding and cultivating the environment with the questions that are raised through my documentation. I use the documentation process as a primary basis and resource for opening discussion with those who may want to learn about constructivism<sup>60</sup> and the Reggio Emilia Approach. I hope and believe that what we share will cause other teachers to be so uncomfortable that they will ask new questions of their own work. I see my role as projecting a passion

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58. For detailed descriptions of my art program, go to my webpage: [www.eceteacher.org](http://www.eceteacher.org) and click "Articles, by me."

59. See Documentation, Part II of this book.

60. The idea that children must *build* their own understandings, that they cannot simply open up and let us drop understandings into them. The work of Jean Piaget, and later Lev Vygotsky, explains constructivism in depth.



that can't be overlooked, a passion that enlists the families in my classroom so they help ignite the spirit of change in our community.

## Steps to staff development

As I supervise people who resist these ideas I ask them to closely observe the children they teach, to look for “aha” moments and to bring them to colleagues to unpack. I suggest they sit down and really listen. I tell them, “Don't hover; *you are learning from the child* and need to keep a low profile. Your camera and recorder will help you by freezing time: collect photographic and audible data, and consider collaboratively what you have collected. As the starting place, try viewing five minutes of video with the staff — and consider using video of yourself with the children as the initial example, so no one feels put on the spot. If this goes well, others will be more likely to offer video from their rooms. As an administrator you must be willing to be amazed and to wonder with staff, be willing to hold onto a question, let it brew and permeate your thinking until you have discovered an answer to it. At times you gently nudge and at other times emphatically challenge staff to take a step. Often teachers find ourselves paralyzed and fearful and we need what the Reggiani call a ‘provocation’, a question that causes disequilibrium which can lead us to growth, and finally to movement! You will need to support a climate in which people can understand and accept disequilibrium (the discomfort of learning something new as one lets go of something it replaces<sup>61</sup>) as a natural and necessary part of change, allowing themselves to *not know* for a while. Make clear that what is discussed isn't about who is better or who knows more. Help people understand that they're not being judged as good or bad teachers, but rather that what is shared and considered is the *work of the center*, to support and scaffold each teacher in her journey. The focus isn't **one** teacher's work but the work of everyone that is shared as part of the learning community, each member strengthening the work of the others.

## Leslie changes her methods:

As a special needs educator my early influences were primarily behaviorist. I worked from developmental checklists showing what children were to learn at each stage, and I was responsible to guide the children toward completing them, particularly children with individual education plans (IEP's). On reflection these checklists and expectations seemed to miss the possibility of the children growing in unique new ways — instead they demanded only a minimum of imagination. The difference — between what I was supposed to ask of children and what they seemed able to produce — prompted me to

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61. See the poem, *Love the Questions*, page 51.

observe the children more closely, and motivated me to connect more closely with the children's families, looking for the ideas and insights they could contribute to help me make a curriculum that honored children's potentials. When I first heard about Reggio in 1994 I felt this was the right journey for me.<sup>62</sup> I began to base my work on *what these children wanted to learn* and could learn, instead of what they were supposed to be trained to do.

## A true curriculum

When I was teaching at Pacific Oaks College in the late 1980's I taught a class called "Emergent Curriculum." In recent years Leslie did a major project around preschool children doing much of their own planning, inventing graphics to represent their activities.<sup>63</sup>

We can revolutionize our teaching by transforming our individual and collaborative reflection, to harmonize with the children's innate *need to grow*. To do less is to rob ourselves and the children of many important and wonderful competencies all of us will need to confront the complex future.

Motivation: imposed or emergent? People like me, who went to teacher-preparation school in the 1960's and 1970's, were taught that every lesson plan had to have an objective and a motivation and the teacher was to write them down. Amazingly, the idea that the children were *already* motivated didn't arise! For people like us, changing our idea about the location of motivation was, itself, a big step, and had a domino effect, changing everything in our planning process as a result.

We're recommending a shift from external "motivations," from a pseudo-scientific approach, from the standardized, testing climate of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top — to a tradition that comes from Plato, through Carl Jung, Herbert Read, and Nel Noddings. We want human sensitivity to inform the classroom. We want teachers to identify the *child's* motivations, and serve them, just the opposite of imposing a "Motivation" as part of a lesson plan.

If we teach children to read and write about what they care about, at the time they want or need the skill — the way they learned to speak — they will learn organically — the motivation will be theirs, not one imposed by another. Generally, a person learns best when he is motivated from *inside*.

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62. At this time I began to read more and embrace new constructivist influences: Rheta DeVries, Constance Kamii, Lillian Katz, Gianni Rodari, David Elkind, and George Forman.

63. You can find information about this work and other projects Leslie has done at Mid-Pacific Institute in Hawai'i at: [www.midpac.edu/elementary/PG/archives.php](http://www.midpac.edu/elementary/PG/archives.php)

Much of educational philosophy, formal and informal, academic and tribal, — the best part — is based on observing children closely.<sup>64</sup> Good teacher training in the US in the sixties — at Bank Street College and Pacific Oaks College, for example — emphasized observing and recording. Further away, Maori and Hawaiian people have always realized the close relationship between teaching and learning since, in their languages, learning and teaching are both represented by the same word (*ako* in Maori, *a'o* in Hawaiian). This linguistic difference makes an English-speaking mind stop and consider — and then consider more. Dr. Malaguzzi said “We must learn how to produce a true curriculum, that is, curriculum produced together with the children.”<sup>65</sup> Are we teaching the children what they want to learn? And, if we aren't, why not?

### Sydney's different perspectives inform our collaboration

In the 1960's, when I (Sydney) directed a publicly-funded childcare program, and in the 1970's when I was teaching public school pre-kindergarten, my practice was to write in a logbook with my co-teachers every day after the children left. As we sat down one day I mentioned to Katherine Primes that “Ivan was having a good day today”<sup>66</sup> at the exact time that I heard her telling me that “Ivan had a hard day today.” In the dialogue provoked by this disagreement we learned that both reports were accurate; I was describing the positives I had seen and she had been in other parts of the room and playground and seen some serious negatives. Our reports modified each other's perceptions, and reminded us of the necessity and value of collaborating and reflecting jointly about our children.

Had we not had this collaborative writing practice each of us would have been left with a one-sided picture of Ivan's complex day. Reggio work is disciplined practice, supporting not only children's growth, but teachers' growth as well. Figuring out what information is in the collected data is much richer when two or more adults collaborate (your collaborator needn't be a colleague, but can be your relative, friend, significant other or the child's parent).

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64. New Zealanders Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Elwyn Richardson; Britishers Susan Isaacs, Sybil Marshall and the Plowden Report (British Infant School movement); Americans John Dewey, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, Selma Wassermann, Lilian Katz, Elizabeth Jones and especially my teachers, Lore Rasmussen (in Philadelphia), Roger Cartwright, Naomi Freilickoff Pile (at Bank St. College) and Lillian Weber (at CCNY), all impacted my image of children before I began to know work from Reggio.

65. Somehow I have an early draft of an article by Dr. Malaguzzi, published later in a slightly different form in *Exchange Magazine* (3/94), called *Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins*. This quotation is from that draft — the language is slightly different and, I think, toned down, in the published piece.

66. See Ivan the Terrible chapter in *The Sun's Not Broken*.

## Necessarily we teach from who we are

We must face our scarred lives (we *all* have scars) and figure out how *not to pass along our emotional injuries to the children*. We need other adults, adults we trust, to help us stay balanced and honest. This new work is difficult, but it rewards us with the resilience we need for the hard work of teaching.

In the following story, Leslie's belief in a strong Image of the Child infects the child's mother.

How powerful is the Image of the Child I hold? Does it strengthen the faith that families of children with special needs have in their child's ability to grow and learn, only to have their new image of their child denied or violated once they leave our environment? I'm troubled by these questions when children move on to other schools, since the "big school" out in the real world, can treat a child with harsh and disrespectful indifference.

Merrylyn is a very bright child with Down Syndrome. In the four years she was in my class I did extensive documentation on her journey and learning. I watched her grow from using vague utterances and signs to speaking sentences, from scribbling to writing her name. Her very fine work has been recorded in several Videatives©.<sup>67</sup> When she was growing too old for our program a decision was made to send her to a separate Special Education unit. I refused to endorse this decision, since she was so capable and this unit had a very destructive Image of the Child. My director negotiated a compromise. They promised they would integrate Merrylyn into a regular classroom "as much as she could tolerate," and they agreed to retest her after a shorter than usual interval and reconsider her placement at that time.

I advised Susie, Merrylyn's mother, always to hold on tightly to her belief in Merrylyn and to let that strong Image guide her. That November I got a disturbing phone call from Susie. Family members had visited Merrylyn's Special Education classroom on four different days at various times of day, and each one found Merrylyn sitting in front of a TV watching Sponge Bob!

Susie met with the teacher, the Special Education coordinator and other administrators. At this meeting Susie found out that Merrylyn was only in the regular classroom briefly each day. The rest of the time she spent in the Special Education classroom. When Susie questioned the teacher about watching TV, she was told that *this was part of Merrylyn's education!*

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67. Videatives are short video clips which George Forman has collected in order to help teachers think through teaching situations. Leslie gave him videos from her classes 2003-5.

At one point the teacher pointed her finger at Susie and said “I’m going to tell you this about your little Miz Merrylyn — she isn’t at all what you think she is, nor how Leslie pictured her! *Sending her to Leslie’s Center ruined her. Had she come into our preschool unit she would never be like this!*” The Special Education coordinator added, “You have unreal expectations of your child. She is mentally retarded and you had better face the fact.”

Susie told me she sat there a moment, trying to ignore the cruelty of these people. She stood up, pounded her fist on the table, and said, “I’m only going to tell you this once! I’m not going to sit here and listen to you talk about my child in this way. My child has enormous potential and I saw Merrylyn grow capable and strong over the past years! That’s the kind of schooling I want for my child!” Then she left. Susie transferred Merrylyn to a different school system. In a couple of months she called me to tell me that she had her IEP meeting with Merrylyn’s new teacher. Merrylyn was now fully integrated in a kindergarten classroom. Like the other children did in her classroom, she was writing words and making friends! Susie was upbeat and excited: “Instead of looking at what Merrylyn *can’t* do, *they see the rich possibilities in her!*”

This kindergarten has a ritual of “child star for the day.” Merrylyn’s day was coming up and she had been practicing to get ready to read a story to the children. Merrylyn was excited about reading to her friends. Susie said that it was that strong Image of Merrylyn that gave her the strength to resist the first school and find a better one, one that let each and every child be a star!

As educators we have taken on, alongside parents, the important work of raising children to be caring, imaginative, thoughtful, creative, responsible, playful, knowledgeable, joyful, skillful, curious and wise. If we cannot trust each other, how can we teach children to trust? If we do not trust one another, why should children trust us? 🐞