Inspired by Reggio Emilia: Emergent Curriculum in Relationship-Driven Learning Environments

Mary Ann Biermeier

What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught, rather, it is in large part due to the children's own doing, as a consequence of their activities and our resources.

—Loris Malaguzzi, *The Hundred Languages of Children*

The author of these words, Loris Malaguzzi, was the founder and director of the renowned municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Malaguzzi passed away two decades ago, but we hope he would be pleased with the progress early childhood educators in North America have made toward understanding his pedagogical lessons. His philosophy—a blend of theory and practice that challenges educators to see children as competent and capable learners in the context of group work (Fraser & Gestwicki 2002)—differs from the widely accepted Piagetian perspective that views child development as largely internal and occurring in stages (Mooney 2013). Malaguzzi emphasized that "it was not so much that we need to think of the child who develops himself by himself but rather of a child who develops himself interacting and developing with others" (Rankin 2004, 82). As such, at the core of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is its emphasis on building and sustaining relationships. Much like Vygotzky, Malaguzzi believed that social learning preceded cognitive development (Gandini 2012). He emphasized that the environment plays a central role in the process of making learning meaningful. So important was this notion, that Malaguzzi defined the environment as the third teacher (Gandini 2011). Malaguzzi's third teacher is a flexible environment, responsive to the need for teachers and children to create learning together. Fostering creativity through the work of young hands manipulating objects or making art, it is an environment that reflects the values we want to communicate to children. Moreover, the classroom environment can help shape a child's identity as a powerful player in his or her own life and the lives of others. To foster such an environment, teachers must go deeper than what is merely seen at eye level and develop a deep understanding of the underlying principles and of children's thinking, questions, and curiosities.

A little more than a decade ago, Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool, in Scottsdale, Arizona, began implementing

Photos courtesy of the author

a program directly influenced by the schools of Reggio Emilia. Inspired by the writings of Lella Gandini, we began a fond relationship with the author and educator, inviting Gandini to visit our school with regularity.

Lella Gandini is best known in North America as the leading advocate for the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. Her numerous publications include writings on early childhood education and folklore, and she is coauthor or coeditor of such works as *Insights and Inspirations From Reggio Emilia: Stories of Teachers and Children From North America* and *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*. It is through our friendship with Lella Gandini that we have implemented strategies that empower teachers to use space and materials to ignite learning. For example, teachers notice in early autumn that the children are taking an interest in spider webs on the playground. Several 4-year-olds discover the strands reflecting the sunlight on a fence post. The teachers know the finding has sparked the children's curiosity when the children ask to photograph the web. Classroom teacher Keri Woolsey describes her response:

> We try to integrate the writing and prewriting skills with the children, so I told the children, "Oh my gosh, I don't have my camera; could you draw it for me?" They ran inside the classroom and got clipboards, paper, and markers and hurried back to the playground. And then they began to draw. Some of these kids typically don't really want to try to write or draw, just because they are not confident with those skills. Yet here they are jumping at the task because it was meaningful to them. No matter what the drawing looked like, it was a total celebration of what they were learning.

Creating a flexible, relationship-driven learning environment

Relationships are at the very heart of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. That philosophy is reflected in an environment that encircles the child with three "teachers," or protagonists. The first teacher—the parent—takes on the role of active partner and guide in the education of the child. The second is the classroom teacher. Often working in pairs, the classroom teacher assumes the role of researcher and intentionally engages children in meaningful work and conversation. The third teacher is the environment—a setting designed to be not only functional but also beautiful and reflective of the child's learning. It is the child's relationship with parent, teacher, and environment that ignites learning.

Children construct their own knowledge through a carefully planned curriculum that engages and builds upon the child's current knowledge, recognizing that knowledge

cannot simply be provided for the child. The curriculum, often emergent in nature, is based on the interests of the children. When learning is the product of the child's guided construction rather than simply the teacher's transmission and the child's absorption, learning becomes individualized. Most important, teaching becomes a two-way relationship in which the teacher's understanding of the child is just as important as the child's understanding of the teacher.

Emergent curriculum is not a free-for-all. It requires that teachers actively seek out and chase the interests of the children. This kind of teaching environment demands a high degree of trust in the teacher's creative abilities,

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Author's Note

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