

The week was full of sunshine, long days and challenging thinking. I was especially captivated by the contributions of Veà Vecchi, *atelierista* of Diana school for 30 years. Having retired in 2000, Veà continues to collaborate with Reggio Children, particularly in the areas of publishing, exhibitions, research projects and concepts of the *atelier* and the theory of one hundred languages. Her contributions across the week were not only through her words but also through her passion, spirit, pleasure and positive energy. Her first sentences of the week gave a glimpse of the complexity we would encounter:

We cannot have a discussion of the atelier if we do not have a background discussion of the culture of education. And I think also that we cannot have a discussion without poetics, aesthetics, epistemology and ethics. These are difficult concepts but are a framework for the idea of the atelier without which the atelier becomes impoverished. The risk is that the atelier simply becomes a place for activities. We use a lot of techniques and materials quite well. The risk is that our gestures are rushed and hurried, not only children's but the adults' as well. We lose the relationship to what we are doing. Only if we are able to give meaning to our actions from the atelier can we get the vital lift in our work. Giving meaning is central.

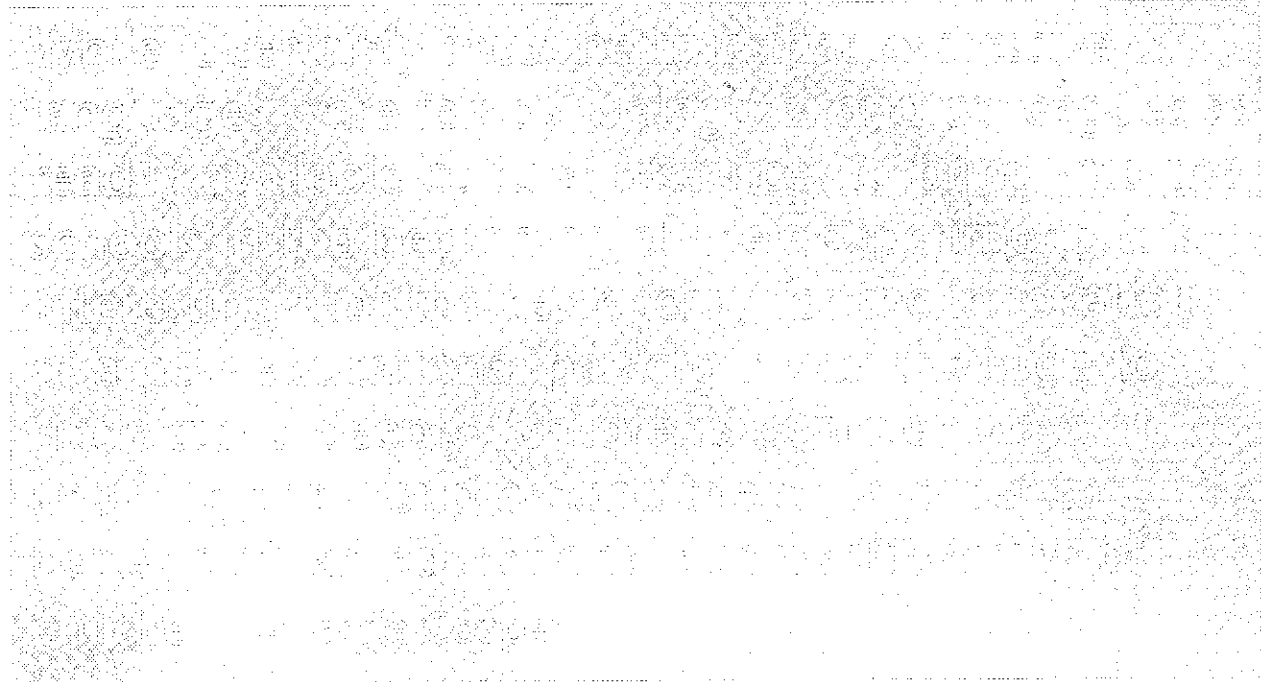


The question that should be accompanying us this week is "how and in what way would processes of learning and teaching be modified and enriched if school culture welcomed the poetic languages and an aesthetic dimension as important elements for building knowledge?" This is not an abstract concept – it has been made real inside the infant-toddler centers and preschools here.

Never more powerfully have I noticed the underlying commitment to "research for innovation" as the concept of the *atelier* was discussed throughout the week. Claudia Giudici, longtime *pedagogista* who attended the Diana School as a child, retraced the early thinking behind introducing both the physical space of the *atelier* and the profile of *atelierista*, "our theoretical intuition suggested a new element was needed in schools to make work more complex and to encounter children's complex ways of knowing the world around them."

While it certainly must be true that expressive languages were felt by Malaguzzi and colleagues as readily available cultural resources to bring into the schools in the beginning of their experience, it is interesting that the key energy for the innovation of a new educational paradigm was the urge to understand deeply "children's complex ways of knowing the world around them" in order to better craft an educational approach worthy of children. Therefore, in contrast to what we sometimes misinterpret as the role of the *atelier* as simply a place of making art or duplicating crafts, and the role of the *atelierista* as simply an art teacher who supplies expressive materials and teaches techniques from an external vantage point – it seems a stronger interpretation to think of the role of the *atelier* as a rich and well-appointed research environment and the role of the *atelierista* as a thoughtful, skillful researcher of children's and adults' ways of knowing who, at the same time, remains a playful, nurturing companion in ongoing experiences with children, families and colleagues. And from this, we must also extrapolate these concepts into the whole school environment, thinking metaphorically of the entire school as an *atelier*.

Malaguzzi referred to the *atelier* as "a retort to the marginal and subsidiary role commonly assigned to expressive education...[and] a reaction against the concept of the education of young children based mainly on words and simple-minded rituals" (Gandini, 2005). The choice of the *atelier* was a strong



declaration of the importance given to expression, creativity and aesthetics as natural fibers within education, and the broad human search for understanding and meaning.

As schools are cultural places for supporting, expanding and creating learning of children and adults, the presence of the *atelier* from the beginning inside the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia has advantaged their collective understanding of the nature of learning and contributed significantly to our field's ongoing curiosities of epistemology. In a strongly first-hand way, deeply rooted in ongoing cycles of observation, documentation and interpretation, Reggio educators have born witness to child learning from its earliest genesis and in its "least restrictive environment," to borrow a concept from the field of special education in this country. Least restrictive environment, in this case, refers not to an "anything goes" chaos but an environment liberated from false boundaries and external caveats that inadvertently impede or unnecessarily parse the complex development of children. Instead, the whole school environment of Reggio infant-toddler centers and preschools, positively contaminated by the concept of the *atelier*, consciously endeavors to research for understanding and to continually provoke children's natural propensities to search for meaning, to pose questions of themselves and others, and to continually interpret

the phenomena of their own lives.

Key to the approach in Reggio is the interpretation of the child's multi-sensory and multi-semiotic approach from birth. Giudici notes,

*...language and languages are words we often use and we use them as concepts to describe the manifold forms and ways of knowing the world and forming knowledge. So we use this concept to describe the many ways of knowing the world and expressing knowledge – or the hundred languages. Perhaps a partial definition of "language" is the different ways children and human beings have of representing, communicating and expressing thoughts through different media and different symbolic systems. Often around the world, the definition reduces to "school subject" or "discipline." In conventional terms, expressive languages mean visual arts, dance or poetry, for example, but we believe that **all** [emphasis original] languages need and have capacity for expressing themselves, and in this need and capacity to express themselves, languages are very often underestimated. When it began to emerge strongly with the work of the children that children know the world around them through a plurality of different ways, we noticed also that these languages – body, music, painting, drawing – all found a strong empathy with children's ways of knowing the world. What emerged from our consideration of these languages is that languages are attuned and they have an emotive empathy with children's ways of knowing, learning and expressing.*



We felt it was necessary to make a choice, not betraying the way humans know the world around them. It was necessary to introduce a new element that would subvert the didactic, traditional way of education – something that would make

classroom work more complex, coherent and congruent with children's ways of knowing the world.

In the early 1930s, our own John Dewey contributed significantly to key foundational underpinnings interpreted by Malaguzzi and colleagues. Though prolific on many aspects of education and society, it was his seminal *Art as Experience* that offered Malaguzzi and his colleagues another vantage point to weave within their retort to traditional education approaches. In discussing the importance of the space in which the human experience communes with the everyday, ordinary experience, Dewey's originality marries the concept of aesthetic to experience:

In order to understand [emphasis original] the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens... The man who poked the sticks of burning wood would say he did it to make the fire burn better; but he is none the

less fascinated by the colorful drama of change enacted before his eyes and imaginatively partakes in it (Dewey, 1934, p. 3).

Often, Reggio educators use the phrase “rich normality” to describe the physical, social, emotional and cognitive environments to which they continually aspire, calling important attention to the promise of ordinary moments. For it is the stringing together of ordinary moments that ultimately gives shape and quality to human life over time, just as it is the stringing together of ordinary moments that ultimately gives shape and quality to infant-toddler centers and preschools. Educators everywhere are deeply cognizant of the professional demands, moment by moment, in building a day together with children and families, and the exponential demands of stringing together a sequence of days and a sequence of years that eventually constitutes a well-lived childhood. Though compelling and seductive, the long-term project work of educators and children in Reggio Emilia that has captured our attention will never be fully understood until we more carefully attend to and deeply examine the style of the daily life that surrounds, lives within and gives birth to the longer research journeys that have captured our imaginations and emotions.

How much positive attention do we give ordinary moments in our programs for young children in North America? For example, the physicality children naturally express in their everyday encounters – running fingertips along a fence line, spinning and darting in open spaces, breathing deeply the

fragrances of the natural world, handling objects to view every angle – are wide ways children build understanding through natural dispositions for researching worlds “polysensorially.” Within these natural ways of children lives an aesthetic dimension, described by Giudici as the “pursuit of loveliness, of harmony, of balance, poise, equilibrium and sensibility to relations” that exists epistemologically. It could be argued, as Dewey and Malaguzzi have argued, that aesthetics is not a separate dimension from experience but is rather an element of experience much like biological DNA exists in form as a double-helix, two threads inextricably connected because the connection itself constitutes its wholeness. Giudici offers:

Very commonly, we find that when we speak in educational terms, aesthetics is usually thought of as something that is added on. When thought of as



*something extra, aesthetics can be chosen or not without affecting processes of building knowledge. Here our experience, starting from observation of children, which then enables our cobbling together theory and practice, has always held to the idea that **aesthetics is the way of knowing** [emphasis original].*

Dewey uses the metaphor of a mountain to convey this conceptual wholeness:

Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who

are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident in its various implications (Dewey, 1934, p. 2).

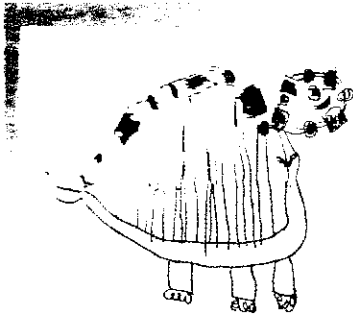
Likewise, it has been taken up as the business of educators in Reggio Emilia, geographers of epistemology, to make evident epistemology’s “manifest operations.” The original contributions of children and adults in Reggio Emilia, in terms of research for innovation, have birthed the new theory of one hundred languages, within which the importance of aesthetics, plurality and complexity is underscored in connection to learning processes and knowledge building.

Stephen Hawking, renowned contemporary physicist, states “we live in a strange and wonderful universe. Its age, size, violence and beauty require extraordinary imagination to appreciate” (Hawking, 2005, p. 3). His view further supports Dewey’s and Malaguzzi’s position that scientific thought and imagination are not separate mental operations but are different points within the complexity of human intelligence that work to build our knowing of the universe, as well as the identity and meaning of our lives. “The difference between the esthetic and the intellectual is thus one of the place where emphasis falls in the constant rhythm that marks the interaction of the live creature with his surroundings” (Dewey, 1934, p. 14).

Vecchi suggests,

...it is quite difficult to say simply what we mean by the aesthetic dimension. An attitude of empathy toward things around us perhaps comes first, an aspiration for quality that makes you choose one work over another or one piece of music over another or the taste of one food over another. This, with other more complicated things, is an attitude of care and attention toward things. So perhaps the aesthetic dimension could be defined as the opposite of indifference or conformism and it could be defined as the opposite of the lack of participation and involvement. Thus, a conscious awareness together with the presence of the aesthetic dimension would raise the quality of learning processes...

Vecchi, quoting Gregory Bateson, “I hold to the premise that losing our sense of aesthetic unity was simply



simply an epistemological error” underscores the disposition for consciously endeavoring to sustain awareness for and commitment to the unity and wholeness in human learning. She continues,

Because we human beings are part of a whole cosmos and if we lose this sense of being a part and in relationship with everything else, we lose something very critical to our experience. Each language is made of rationality and imagination – all [emphasis original] languages, not just art. An educational culture that separates disciplines loses a lot of the meaning of holding things together. Among artists, it is recognized that there is an expressive way of living and mathematicians are recognized to have cognitive ability but when we separate these abilities by discipline, we impoverish both of them.

A biological part of our makeup is to think in a complex way. If part of that complexity is not recognized, then our ways of thinking and our learning processes will be impoverished. Imagination has cognition and rationality. In all learning processes, these elements are kept connected. It is not an easy task and we cannot always do it but that is what our objective should be. To hold

closely the interwoven nature of learning means not only our final products are changed but the quality of the processes. And it is the quality of the process that we are most interested in.

*Boncinelli and various philosophers over the centuries have spoken and discussed aesthetics. Aristotle, Kant and current philosophers all situate aesthetics within an area of tension. And in this area of tension, reason and imagination encounter one another. Human thinking is seen as a moving border in continuous backwards and forwards movement, continually reinventing. This area of tension is very often the area that generates renewal and new paradigms, so we can say it is a producer of creativity. If we accept the definition of intelligence from Boncinelli, where he says learning takes place through connecting elements, which are sometimes distant and if we take aesthetics, which produces favorable conditions for connecting, then **aesthetics can be considered to be an important activator of learning.** Even if these ideas are only partially true, it is still very difficult to understand why aesthetics is such a long distance from professional development and education. Art is profoundly epistemological and pedagogical....*

Beautiful products are a testament only to beautiful processes. The pursuit of beauty and loveliness is a part of all of us. If you think back to past eras, not just works of art but objects of everyday life – vases, jewels, clothes – the simplest, most everyday things through all eras and all cultures, you will find this search for loveliness and attention for the shape of things, the form of things...I continue to believe beauty constitutes salvation for men and women. I believe they must be considered rights of humans rather than needs.

In aesthetics as we mean it – the promoter of relations, connections, sensibilities, freedom and expression – vicinity to ethics appears natural. As far as education is concerned, we cannot renounce bringing aesthetics and ethics together. They are a pair and when placed together are the best ideas for placing a distance in the suffocation of rights of people. When placed together, they are one of the greatest barriers to violence and oppression. The aesthetic experience is the freedom of thought. It is no coincidence that avant garde research is always oppressed in dictatorships. The aesthetic sense goes beyond the border of visual languages into every other discipline. Once, a mathematician said, "When God sang, he sang in algebra." This notion communicates numbers as beautiful. Beauty in no way diminishes the rigor and cognition of studying numbers.

From the doorway of these key but not exhaustive orientations to the theory of the hundred languages, it is possible to realize the original contributions of this theory to the body of epistemological insight continuously being built. We can observe that their disposition for relations, connections, plurality, differences and expression has given rise to new perspectives regarding "the art of knowledge" (Rinaldi, 2009). By viewing "art" not as a discipline but as a "fusional part of the learning experience" (Rinaldi, 2009), educators everywhere have been offered new potentials for strengthening experiences within programs for young children.

In mentally revisiting and remembering the experience of the April study week, I realize anew that it is not a minor detail, the way in which our colleagues from Reggio Emilia laughed together, teased one another, and levied serious criticism and suggestion to one another during the course of conversation. These are expressions of educators who have devoted themselves and their careers to the defense and promotion of children's rights. Along this path, they have also researched, defended, protected

and promoted the right of education to embrace forms of knowledge that have beauty as the center of the human experience. To visit the infant-toddler centers and preschools there is to witness the bounty of such an approach.

As it always does, thinking about the educational project in Reggio Emilia causes us to think about and wonder about our own educational projects here in North America. I am always deeply struck by the devotion, determination, seriousness, playfulness and willingness to remain present for long discussions about the meaning of experiences underway in the 46 infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio, the capacity for thinking, creating and projecting, and the sheer depth of familiarity with historical and contemporary literature from the arts and sciences displayed by the Reggio Emilia team.



I have come to believe that we child advocates of North America are better supported in our vision for children, families and educators, the more we borrow dispositions and attitudes from Reggio Emilia, rather than techniques and examples. The deep message I witnessed during this particular week of study was the promise beauty affords us as learners. Inside difficult thinking is pleasure, harmony and poise that rewards and sustains the human experience. I wish for all of us, in our ongoing quest to give more excellence and quality to education, that we question ourselves as Veia questioned us:

Is it so mistaken to believe that learning can exist in which wonder, ethics and beauty, pleasure and rigor are at the basis of knowing?