

The *Atelier* as a Place of Provocation

Gandini: *How did the idea and the establishment of the atelier work into your educational project?*

Malaguzzi: I will not hide from you how much hope we invested in the introduction of the *atelier*. We knew it would be impossible to ask for anything more. Yet, if we could have done so we would have gone further still by creating a new type of school typology with a new school made entirely of laboratories similar to the *atelier*. We would have constructed a new type of school made of spaces where the hands of children could be active for “messing about” (in the sense that David Hawkins was going to tell us better, later). With no pos-

sibility of boredom, hands and minds would engage each other with great, liberating merriment in the way ordained by biology and evolution.

Although we did not come close to achieving those impossible ideals, still the *atelier* has always repaid us. It has, as desired, proved to be subversive—generating complexity and new tools for thought. It has allowed rich combinations and creative possibilities among the different (symbolic) languages of children. The *atelier* has protected us not only from the long-winded speeches and didactic theories of our time (just about the only preparation received by young teachers!), but also from the behavioristic beliefs of the surrounding culture, reducing the human mind to some kind of “container” to be filled.

The *atelier* has met other needs as well. One of the most urgent problems was how to achieve effective communication with the parents. We wanted to always keep them informed about the goings-on in the schools, and at the same time establish a system of communication that would document the work being done with the children. We wanted to show parents how the children thought and expressed themselves, what they produced and invented with their hands and their intelligence, how they played and joked with one another, how they discussed hypotheses, how their logic functioned. We wanted the parents to see that their children had richer resources and more skills than generally realized. We wanted the parents to understand how much value we placed in their children. In return, then, we felt it would be fair to ask parents to help us and be on our side.

The *atelier*, a space rich in materials, tools, and people with professional competences, has contributed much to our work on documentation. This work has strongly informed—little by little—our way of being with children. It has also, in a rather beautiful way, obliged us to refine our methods of observation and recording so that the processes of children’s learning became the basis of our dialogue with parents. Finally, our work in the *atelier* has provided us with archives that are now a treasure trove of children’s work and teachers’ knowledge and research. Let me emphasize, however, that the *atelier* was never intended to be a sort of secluded, privileged space, as if there and only there the languages of expressive art could be produced.

It was, instead, a place where children’s different languages could be explored by them and studied by us in a favorable and peaceful atmosphere. We and they could experiment with alternative modalities, techniques, instruments, and materials; explore themes chose by children or suggested by us; perhaps work on a large fresco in a group; perhaps prepare a poster where one makes a concise statement through words and illustrations; perhaps even master small projects on a reduced scale, stealing their skills from architects! What was important was to help the children find their own styles of exchanging with friends both their talents and their discoveries.

But the *atelier* was most of all a place for research, and we expect that it will continue and increase. We have studied everything, from the affinities and

oppositions of different forms and colors, to the complex aims of narrative and argumentation; from the transition of expressing images in symbols to decoding them; from the way children have been contaminated by exposure to mass media, to gender differences in symbolic and expressive preferences. We have always found it a privilege to be able to encounter the fascinating multiple games that can be played with images: turning a poppy into a spot, a light, a bird in flight, a lighted ghost, a handful of red petals within a field of green and yellow wheat. So positive and confirming were our experiences that they eventually led us to expand the use of the *atelier* into the centers for the youngest children in the infant-toddler centers.

Genesis and Meanings of Creativity

Gandini: *Creative behavior and creative production by children has been an elusive theme, about which pages and pages have been written. What is your own view on the subject?*

Malaguzzi: We were all very weak and unprepared in the 1950s when the theme of creativity, just landed from the United States, crossed our path. I remember the eagerness with which we read the theories of J.P. Guilford and Paul Torrance. I also remember how later on those theories could be reread and reinterpreted through the perspectives of Bruner, Piaget, and the Cognitivists, the neo-Freudians, Kurt Lewin, the last of the Gestalt psychologists, and the humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.

It was a difficult but exciting period; we felt that those proposals had great vigor and potential. The work on creativity seemed disruptive to many (almost too many) things; for example, the philosophical dimension of man and life and the productivity of thought. These proposals went so far as to suggest complexity with the unconscious, chance and the emotions with feelings, and so on. Yet, despite their brilliant attractiveness, we have to say frankly that after many years of work, the progress of our own experience, plus our observation and study of children and adults, have suggested to us much caution and reflection.

As we have chosen to work with children we can say that they are the best evaluators and the most sensitive judges of the values and usefulness of creativity. This comes about because they have the privilege of not being exclusively attached to their own ideas, which they construct and reinvent continuously. They are apt to explore, make discoveries, change their points of view, and fall in love with forms and meanings that transform themselves.

Therefore, as we do not consider creativity sacred, we do not consider it as extraordinary but rather as likely to emerge from daily experience. This view is now shared by many. We can sum up our beliefs as follows:

1. Creativity should not be considered a separate mental faculty but a characteristic of our way of thinking, knowing, and making choices.

5. Creativity seems to find its power when adults are less tied to prescriptive teaching methods, but instead become observers and interpreters of problematic situations.
6. Creativity seems to be favored or disfavored according to the expectations of teachers, schools, families, and communities as well as society at large, according to the ways children perceive those expectations.
7. Creativity becomes more visible when adults try to be more attentive to the cognitive processes of children than to the results they achieve in various fields of doing and understanding.
8. The more teachers are convinced that intellectual and expressive activities have both multiplying and unifying possibilities, the more creativity favors friendly exchanges with imagination and fantasy.
9. Creativity requires that the *school of knowing* finds connections with *the school of expressing*, opening the doors (this is our slogan) to the hundred languages of children.

Starting with these ideas, we have been trying to understand how they should be revised, yet without letting the myths of spontaneity, which often accompany the myths of creativity, mislead us. We are convinced that between basic intellectual capacities and creativity, a theme preferred by American research, there is not opposition but rather complementarity. The spirit of play can pervade also the formation and construction of thought.

Often when people come to us and observe our children, they ask us which magic spell we have used. We answer that their surprise equals our surprise. Creativity? It is always difficult to notice when it is dressed in everyday clothing and has the ability to appear and disappear suddenly. Our task, regarding creativity, is to help children climb their own mountains, as high as possible. No one can do more. We are restrained by our awareness that people's expectations about creativity should not weigh on the school. An excessive widening of its functions and powers would give to the school an exclusive role that it cannot have.

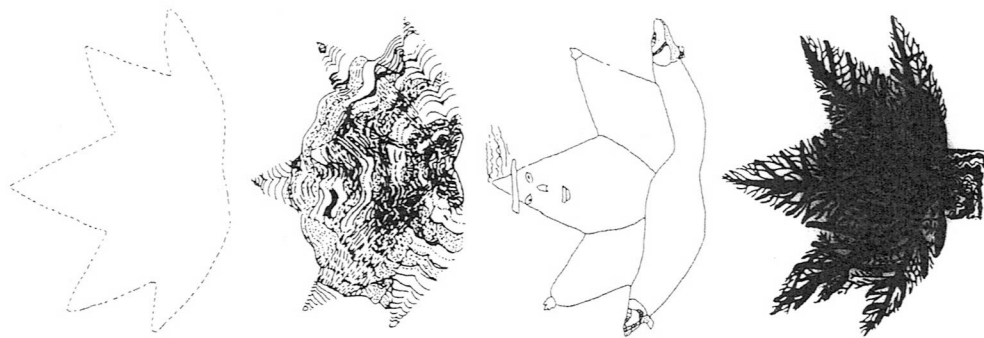


FIGURE 3.9. "A leaf can become...." Drawings by children of the Diana School.

2. Creativity seems to emerge from multiple experiences, coupled with a well-supported development of personal resources, including a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known.
3. Creativity seems to express itself through cognitive, affective, and imaginative processes. These come together and support the skills for predicting and arriving at unexpected solutions.
4. The most favorable situation for creativity seems to be interpersonal exchange, with negotiation of conflicts and comparison of ideas and actions being the decisive elements.