

# Innovations

in early education: the international reggio exchange

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## THE ENCHANTMENT OF WRITING:

### Approaches to Literacy Development in the Experience of the Reggio Emilia Municipal Infant- Toddler Centers and Preschools, and with the Primary School

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#### WHAT'S INSIDE

Literacy in the Social  
Constructivist Classroom

*Emergent Curriculum in the  
Primary Classroom:  
Interpreting the Reggio  
Emilia Approach in Schools*  
- A Book Review

NAREA Column  
The Presence of  
"The Wonder of Learning -  
The Hundred Languages  
of Children" Exhibit in  
Chicago, Illinois

"The Wonder of Learning -  
The Hundred Languages  
of Children"  
Exhibit Schedule

North American  
Study Groups in  
Reggio Emilia, Italy

New Resources

*The following two articles offer perspectives on the philosophy of and research projects related to literacy development within the Reggio Emilia municipal educational project. The first article, "Between Signs and Writing: How Children Approach the Written Code" by Claudia Giudici is based on her presentation during an International Study Group in Reggio Emilia. The second article, "Children and Figurative Writing" by Paola Cagliari, Claudia Giudici, Mariarosaria Pranzitelli and Vea Vecchi describes a research project that took place at the Diana Municipal Preschool in collaboration with several primary schools in Reggio Emilia. "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit includes a section titled, "The Enchantment of Writing," which features experiences of children, educators and families in projects titled, "Between signs and writing" and "Figurative writing." The editors of Innovations would like to express their appreciation to Amelia Gambetti, Paola Riccò and Emanuela Vercalli of Reggio Children for their contribution to the publication of these articles. The editor of Innovations would also like to express her appreciation to Lella Gandini for the translation of these articles.*

### Between Signs and Writing: How Children Approach the Written Code

by Claudia Giudici

*Claudia Giudici is a Pedagogista and President of the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia.*

This article intends to offer an introduction to the inquiry project that we developed in the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia. The subject is literacy development before six year-old children are formally taught reading and writing in the primary school.

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### *Assumptions and aims of the project*

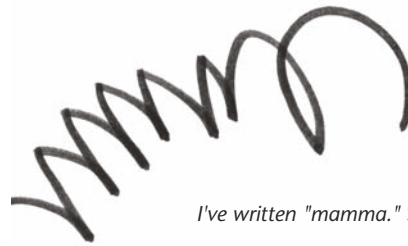
The approach to “codes” and, in particular, the alphabetic code is not a new idea in our experience because for quite some time, we have intentionally prepared contexts and strategies that give attention to symbolic learning. The research projects on this topic took place in all infant-toddler centers and preschools some years ago. The shared notion from the beginning was the development of the capacity to use symbols, which is present in children from birth.

We encounter that capacity when very young children – even before the emergence of language – begin to use their body and objects symbolically. Next children develop the ability to use symbols separate from the objects to which the symbols refer and, subsequently, they develop the capacity to use the alphabetic and numerical code.

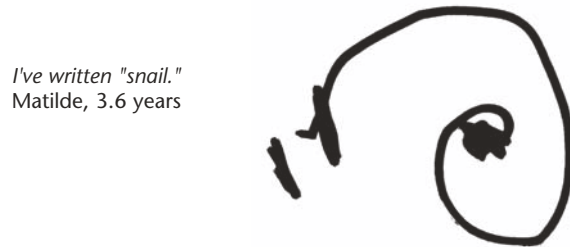
What were the assumptions and aims of this inquiry? We began with the idea that the written language is a cultural invention. The written language must be an object of knowledge before it can convey knowledge. While the children try to understand this “object” in reality, they also reinvent it. That is, they personally and subjectively reconstruct it by creating original linguistic theories that are individual or group-driven.

I would like to clarify what we mean when we say that a child reinvents writing. First of all, we do not mean that children re-invent letters but, rather, that they reconstruct the rules of the code. The child, in order to productively use the system of writing, has to understand the process of its construction and rules of its production. In other words, the child deconstructs and restructures writing.

We have noticed that even very young children in the infant-toddler centers, without specific invitations or requests, try to explore the alphabetic code and begin to differentiate writing from drawing. These attempts are spontaneous as children are immersed today more than ever in a society in which “visual” communication predominates. We have valued and documented these first initiatives by children.



*I've written "mamma." Sara, 3 years*



*I've written "snail." Matilde, 3.6 years*

The theoretical references that we used to begin the inquiry are connected to research by Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky, who have elaborated on this research along with others, including Cristina Zuccermaglio. Their research is longitudinal and transcultural. They highlight a process that is at the basis of the construction of the written language and focus on children through four years of age.

We have given a great deal of attention to these studies because they are based on a socio-constructivist approach:

- They recognize an active and constructive role in the process of knowledge building in the children. Children do not simply receive information from their context but they transform it in order to understand it.
- They recognize that to read and write is much more than “learning the alphabet” and that is not only limited to the learning of “instrumental” techniques.
- They maintain that literacy is not only the acquisition of a technique of transcription of the code but the discovery of the rules by which the code functions.

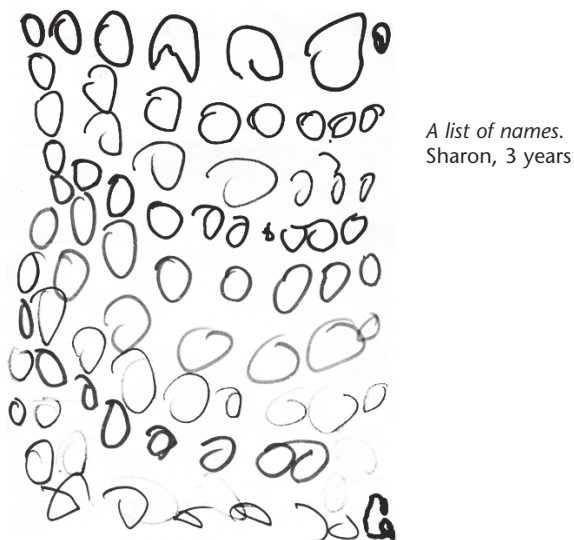
Therefore, these research studies move the concept of writing from an instrumental view, which is based mainly on motor-perceptive skills and abilities, to a conceptual view of writing that focuses on the existence of progressive conceptualization. These studies are very useful on a didactic level as well. Our investigations confirm that if we know how to observe children, we will be able to understand the processes

that children activate and in which they participate in their learning paths in a way and time that best supports their growth and evolution.

It is important to eliminate right away the perplexity that could result from this statement at the infant-toddler centers and preschools. We are not trying to refer to an anticipation of the formal teaching of reading and writing that takes place in the primary schools in Italy. Rather, we are trying to think about a different quality of literacy.

The objectives of our work were:

- to investigate how children explore in original ways the written code when they have not yet received any formal instruction; and
- to make it possible for the children to be accompanied in transforming their theories as they come closer to the conventionalization of the alphabetic code.



### *Nature of the inquiry*

This inquiry was a "sounding" in order to go deeper into learning; it was neither a daily happening nor a didactic project. Loris Malaguzzi defined "sounding" in this way:

*A "sounding" is an occasion, an instrument, an observation of the observation or better...[a sounding] is knowing about knowledge and learning...one of the most desirable and fertile experiences in the individual fields of knowing and knowing through the relationships among individuals...a sounding is, therefore, neither a simulation nor a laboratory research. It emerges from a problem owned by children and owned by the adults who work with them.*

In this instance, we consider a "sounding" to be a thematic project conducted by a small group with the goal of observing the learning strategies of children and of adults.

Which aspects did this inquiry deepen?

The inquiry focused on some processes of learning and teaching connected with writing:

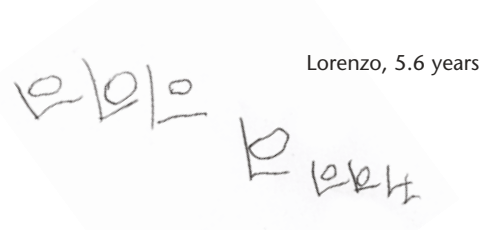
- the difference between drawing and writing;
- the writing of one's name;
- the recognition of the functions and the goals of writing;
- the construction of a text (codification);
- the legibility of a text (decodification); and
- the conflictual relation of learning.

The investigation took place in learning-teaching contexts where the interaction and communication among children, and among children and adults are highly valued and supported, and where socio-cognitive conflict is valued. In these contexts of observation, a dynamic of learning evolves but is accompanied by a dynamic of reflection about learning. Therefore, learning and reflection take place within the group and within the individuals, which encourages the children to make attempts and experiments, to make statements and correct them, to restructure what they know either by themselves or together with the other children. In other words, we could say that each context of observation is always, at the same time, a context of experience, interaction and construction of knowledge.

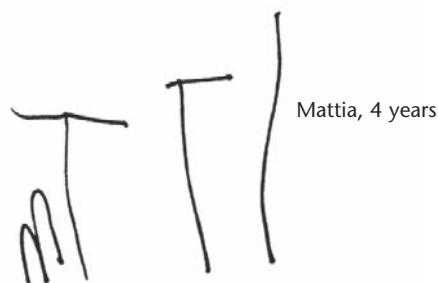
The investigation took place in learning-teaching contexts where the interaction and communication among children, and among children and adults are highly valued and supported, and where socio-cognitive conflict is valued.

—Claudia Giudici

*"Would you like to try and copy your name?"*



Lorenzo, 5.6 years



Mattia, 4 years



Margherita, 4.5 years



Irene, 4 years

### ***Contexts of observation, interaction and learning***

The context is an integral part of the process of learning. It is neither objective nor definitive. The context evolves according to the meanings that children and adults give to it, time after time. Both children and adults participate in the construction of the context, to its transformation and to its variation in space and time. The minds of the people who are in the context are an important variable of the context itself.

The contexts are not simply containers that are visibly organized for a goal, i.e., the space, the materials, the

tools. Contexts are also a form of life, rich in the memories and culture of the people who live within it. They are also situations that contain some part that is artificial and renders them meaningful for children, if the children's learning processes can find roots in experiences lived by others.

By offering our experiences and reflections about early literacy development, we hope to encourage educators of young children to create an environment that is conducive for supporting children who are ready to explore this rich language...the written word.

## Children and Figurative Writing

by Paola Cagliari, Claudia Giudici, Mariarosaria Pranzitelli and Vea Vecchi

*Paola Cagliari, Pedagogista, is the Director of the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. Claudia Giudici, Pedagogista, is the President of the Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. Mariarosaria Pranzitelli is a Teacher at Italo Calvino State Primary School. Vea Vecchi, Atelierista, is Responsible for Atelier, Exhibits and Publishing at Reggio Children.*

*Every possible use of words should be made available to every single person. Not because everyone should be an artist but because no one should be a slave. –Gianni Rodari (1973/1996)*

This project was prompted by an exhibition shown in Reggio Emilia in 2002 titled, *"Alfabeto in Sogno"* or *"Alphabet in Dream,"* which dealt with the topic of figurative language and concrete poetry. What impressed us was the fact that the artistic and poetic journeys and products shown in the exhibition were analogous with our observations over the years of children's autonomous strategies for building theories and practice in relation to the "code" of writing. In fact, the pathways and products exhibited possessed the quality of closely interweaving the code of writing with expressiveness, aesthetics and a search for effective communication. "Figurative" writing is one of the names we give to a particular form of writing, which includes drawn or written "signs" that give multiple meanings to words, letters and sentences. Text and image are interwoven to enhance the communicative capacity of written words, accentuate identity and add more meaning to a particular subject or context.

We could explain the idea of figurative writing using the semiotic concept of syncretism, which is a text that organizes heterogeneous languages into a unified strategy for communication (Cosenza, 2004). Since the invention of the first alphabet, mankind has continued to experiment with basic shapes – differentiating them, transforming them and varying them in research, both aesthetic and communicative.

We all know how important these aspects are in the construction of knowledge processes. Nevertheless, in schools, the tendency is to teach the technique of reading and writing before children are given the opportunity to use the written code expressively. Graphic designer Giovanni Lussu (1999) recounts how schools tend to separate phonetics from the writing of a letter. They don't seem to value the expressive potential of the shape of letters and are interested only in reproducing their sounds. This attitude springs from a prejudice that considers words, above all, in connection to spoken language, and considers drawing and writing signs from a merely functional point of view, totally emphasizing the arbitrary nature of the signs.

In the pedagogy of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, we believe instead that communication, the aesthetic aspect and the expressivity of many languages have established an original interpretation within educational practice. Engagement in an experience of figurative writing makes it possible to integrate technique and expressivity. This project demonstrated our belief that the first phase of formalized instruction in learning the written code could be a favorable context for encounter, exchange and dialogue between the experiences of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, and those of the primary schools.

### *What is figurative writing?*

The written code, the most powerful and flexible symbolic code that humanity has created, has always been the object of graphic experimentations. The evolution of writing has developed throughout 26 centuries and within many different civilizations. The first examples of graphic art, for some, the first examples of human use of symbols, are dated about 300,000 years ago and were found on a bone fragment with a carved set of lines made at regular intervals. Less than 40,000 years ago, modern man created cave paintings or rock graffiti that, for the most part, we have not deciphered because the code they used was ignored. But we can recognize the strong quality of imagination and the strong intention to communicate in these cave paintings. Some sequences of lines seem to be forms of writing. Without a doubt, these archaeological findings have a connection with the beginning of the evolution of writing.



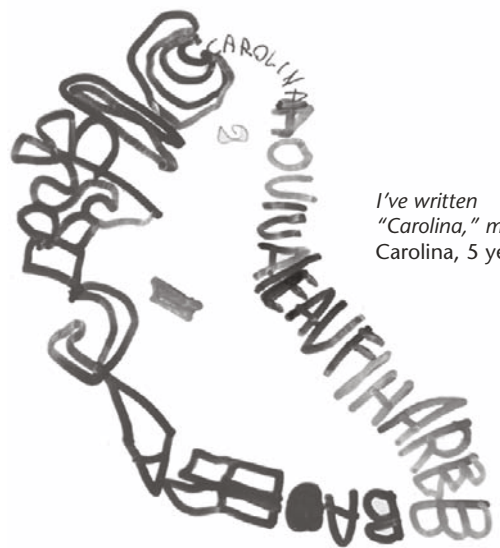
Therefore, perception and visual communication are the principal tools of writing. Writing is always imagery, and removing it from this natural aesthetic context minimizes its expressive and communicative potential. –Paola Cagliari, Claudia Giudici, Mariarosaria Pranzitelli and Veà Vecchi

From the invention of the first alphabets, humanity has continued to experiment with differences and transformations. In our times, the letters of our alphabet, the written words in the field of poetry, of artistic expression and even in advertising take on a strong expressive character. The written code is, in fact, not separate from visual language, because the graphic sign carries meaning. Therefore, perception and visual communication are the principal tools of writing. Writing is always imagery, and removing it from this natural aesthetic context minimizes its expressive and communicative potential.

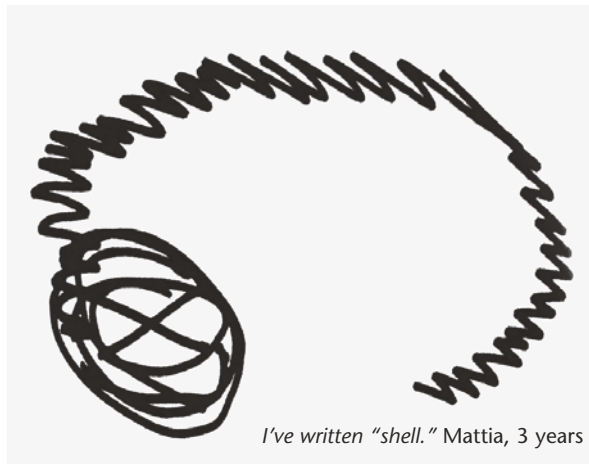
We believe that separating written words from the page that holds them – from the color, the rhythm of spaces and shapes – can deprive them of communicative, playful and creative possibilities. Moreover, if children are free to explore when learning to write, they develop written communication through the simultaneous presence of a number of elements, which they consider to be an integral part of communication, such as the graphic symbols of letters, the size of the letters and the words, the chromatic and tactile choice of paper on which to write the words, the choice of colors to make the letters, and graphic marks and decorations to accompany the written words.

A handwritten word "ALICE" in a simple, blocky font. The letters are dark and slightly irregular, with some spacing between them.

*Happy Alice. Alice, 5 years*

A handwritten word "CAROLINA" in a stylized, circular font. The letters are dark and slightly irregular, with some spacing between them. The word is written in a circular pattern, with the letters "CAROLINA" arranged in a circle.

*I've written  
"Carolina," my name.  
Carolina, 5 years*



### *The reasons for the choice*

Literacy is a topic of great interest both in the preschool and in the primary school in Italy. In 2001, Law 53 was passed: "The primary school in a first year of connection with the preschool is intended to construct basic instrumental learning." The national guidelines consign to the preschool, among other things, the task to construct learning to distinguish between the signs of words, images, drawings and writing; between what is meant and the meaning; and learning to elaborate conjectures, personal codes connected with written language. They consign to the first year of primary school the learning of reading and writing in the Italian language, including the teaching of the different graphic characters and the organization on the page, with the goal of graphically organizing the written communication, using also different graphic characters.

We are convinced that a more aware relationship between text and its form, when the content becomes evident from that specific connection, brings a deeper and more integrated knowledge of the written code, supported by a greater motivation, creativity and pleasure. This encourages children to manipulate writing, finding stimulating syntheses between figurative expression and content, which favors basic instrumental learning.

Considering this context, our initiative was of great interest for the preschool and primary school. When children explore the written code (long before formal instruction begins), they use an approach of experimentation, research and invention. These are characterized by association of letters to what is known, and the transformation and mixing of signs,

drawings and codes. It is widely recognized by research in this field that these experimentations are an essential basis for constructing conceptual learning of reading and writing. We believe that it is important that the learning of reading and writing be accompanied and supported by a didactic approach that, in different ways, keeps the magic of writing and of the written word alive.

### *An experience in figurative writing with Diana Municipal Preschool and Ludovico Ariosto, Annunziata Bergonzi, Italo Calvino and Carlo Colladi State Primary Schools*

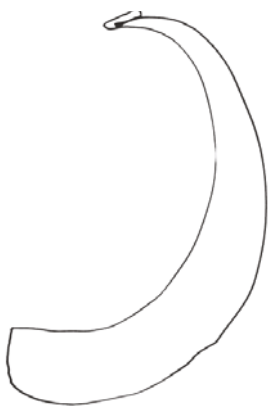
This experience in figurative writing was with children from three to seven years in one municipal preschool, and seven first grade and two second grade classes in four state primary schools. The experience took place at the beginning of the school year, when the majority of primary school children were beginning to encounter formalized teaching of the written code. Different professionals collaborated with the intention to research and make evident possible elements of continuity connected with the socio-constructivist approach that children had experienced in the preschool and in the formalized teaching that is part of the primary school. *Atelieristi* worked together with classroom teachers, both on designing the work and on supporting the work in class. This made it possible to alternate times when the whole group worked together with working in small groups and, therefore, propose diversified "contexts."

Work spaces were arranged so that materials as well as different supports and writing techniques were freely available for experimentation by the children. We consider materials themselves to be generators of suggestion, of mental and communicative imagery. Proposals for work were used side-by-side with various methods of teaching reading and writing (syllabic, whole words, analysis, etc.). Our intention was that children should "enter" the world of written language not only through technical means and tools but also by seeing its communicative potential as much as possible. We believe that the process was facilitated by "condensing" work into extremely small areas of signs...a synthesized and symbolic "nucleus of meaning." Sentences or longer pieces of text risk making meaning explicit and orienting children's work toward decoration only.

We consider materials themselves to be generators of suggestion, of mental and communicative imagery... Our intention was that children should "enter" the world of written language not only through technical means and tools but also by seeing its communicative potential as much as possible. –Paola Cagliari, Claudia Giudici, Mariarosaria Pranzitelli and Veà Vecchi

In their initial approach, many teachers invited children to "experiment with words and letters." "Experiment" seems to be a particularly well-chosen word because it supposes the idea that there is not one correct answer and suggests the freedom of conceiving, seeking and trying in a process where trial, error and lack of success are part of the journey, the rules and the very ethics of experimentation. Freedom to try things makes our thinking less timid and supports not only the "doing" but also the "creating."

Letters were explored simultaneously for the potential



and suggestion of their phonetics and form. The graphics of letters themselves suggested possibilities for transformation.

*An S that has eaten too much.*

A child illustrates a possible sequence for transformation:

*Draw an A, if you take away the short line and turn it upside down, it becomes a V. If you add a line, it turns into an arrow.*

This strategy of taking apart and putting back together activates a process of analysis and transformational recomposition of the elements, which form the letters.

Children say about words:

*You can write words that are scared, struck by lightning, speared, flowering, bad, magic, smiling, weeping...*

Teachers ask:

*What words could we experiment with?*

Children respond:

*Love, rainbow, friends, magic, autumn, moon, star, light, world, hole, music.*

In the words of Gianni Rodari (1973/1996), what "tricks" can we invent "to get words and images moving"? All words can be used to interpret different situations, especially by using a tone of voice or by pairing them with an adjective, so that wind can be a spring wind, stormy wind, scented wind or strong wind, etc.

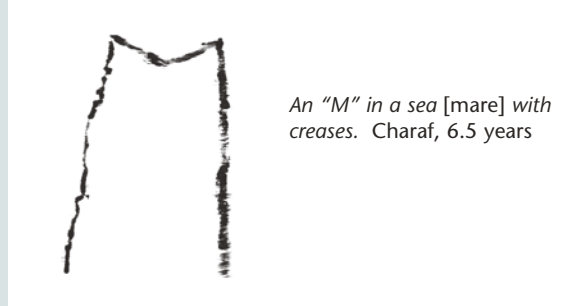


### *Experimenting with letters and words*

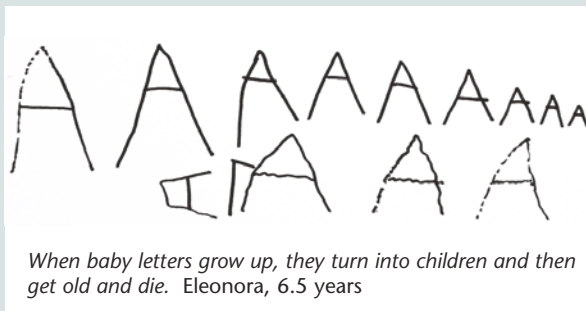
Experimenting means mixing to get something new, constructing, inventing, imagining, creating, transforming.

*"S" is a letter in a storm...ssssssssssssssss.*

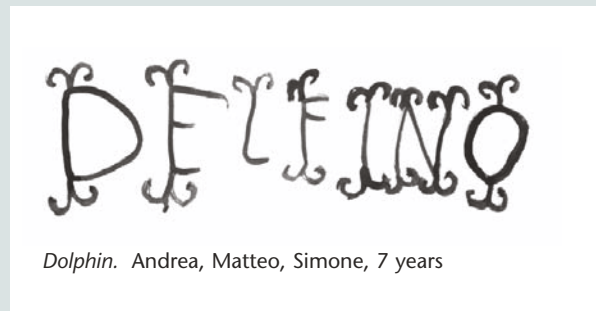
*"L" is a calm letter.*



An "M" in a sea [mare] with creases. Charaf, 6.5 years



When baby letters grow up, they turn into children and then get old and die. Eleonora, 6.5 years



Dolphin. Andrea, Matteo, Simone, 7 years



Sea, quivering. Paolo, 6.5 years



A deep "D" sinking into the night. Nicola, 6 years

Another procedure consisted of encountering and exploring paper of different shapes, color, weight, thickness, consistency and texture, and other materials evoking suggestive, communicative imagery.

The teacher asked:

*Is the sea, which you have defined as an interesting word, always the same? What could it be like?*

The children responded:

*Dazzling because the sun shines into it...angry...calm...happy at sunset because it wants the dark...rough...*

*with rain...with a serious face and black froth...raging...*

The children explored many facets of the same subject. So that, for each word chosen, a verbal sequence begins, of coupling with adjectives, making visible to each child how each word is always a "multi-word" that can express a variety of natures and different relations. How to write the characters of these different "seas"? Once again, choosing the support to write on becomes a vital element.

In a third approach, words and material became "one." One material suggested another in a sort of echoing of the senses, a process of imagination, which evolved into poetic imagery.

As with the children, we have developed good relationships with and among the adults through the meetings and moments of reflection and sharing among the different professionals involved when we analyzed the road we had taken, made adjustments and planned next steps.

Gianni Rodari (1973/1996) suggested, "A word thrown by chance into the mind produces waves on the surface and in the depths. It provokes an infinite series of chains and as it falls, evokes sounds and images, analogues and recollections, the imagination and the unconscious..."

We chose to experiment with letters and words rather than complete sentences. The positive aspect of this choice emerged during the experience with the children and easily accompanied the different methods of teaching reading and writing by the different teachers. The experience, in general, did not substitute for but rather seemed to integrate the methods of teaching chosen in each class. Above all, our intent was for the child to enter into the world of the written word, becoming aware of the communicative aspects of, in particular, letters and single words.

All the experiences have been documented in the schools, and a documentary of images was presented and discussed among educators, children and parents involved in the research. Each classroom followed different roads based on the research that the children themselves activated.

In the course of the experimentation, the children would more and more often ask their peers, "Do you think it is understandable? Do you understand?" It is important in a process of this kind that the work of communication asks for and receives the point of view of others (not only the teacher) to verify what is communicated. The pauses used to discuss and reflect contributed generally to the evolution of the work. At times, the children would review a completed writing and rework it with new intuitions. Therefore, there was a continuous and valuable work of revision. When the children reflected in groups, their work evolved and we believe this was a very

positive aspect of this project. With the examples we have selected from the very rich production by the children, we hope to give a sense of how the combination of expressivity and technique sustained and brought to life the magic of writing.

### *Reflections*

What indications can we extract from an experience that was necessarily limited? First of all, this type of approach, parallel to the formal and traditional instructions about the written code, can offer a possibility of giving more meaning to the power of communication. This was of interest to the primary schools.

But in our view, what is more relevant is giving children the possibility to produce a writing that represents more complex meanings that both adults and children recognize. This is especially true in the transition toward learning and becoming competent with the formal written code, in order to make it strongly communicative. This approach to writing, if it is supported by a procedure of research similar to the one with which we have experimented, includes making predictions, exchanging ideas, comparing them visually and discussing with others. This offers children awareness about the process with which they create connections and new thoughts. If this possibility is legitimate, recognized and supported by the school, it contributes to an attitude of shared research and openness to a diversity of ideas that goes beyond the experience of figurative writing.

Another consideration is the possibility of encountering, through a process of this type with young children of preschool and primary grades, poetic uses of the spoken and written language that are studied in later years, such as metaphor, analogy and metonymy [a figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated].

One of the most important aspects of the pedagogy of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia is the importance given to the aesthetic dimension in education and, therefore, to expressive languages. All languages have potentials for expressivity. Expressivity, we believe, can keep rationality, imagination, cognition, sensitivity and aesthetic strongly together, producing the possibility to listen to others in the world.

But in our view, what is more relevant is giving children the possibility to produce a writing that represents more complex meanings that both adults and children recognize. This is especially true in the transition toward learning and becoming competent with the formal written code, in order to make it strongly communicative. –Paola Cagliari, Claudia Giudici, Mariarosaria Pranzitelli and Veà Vecchi

Jerome Bruner states, “One of the tasks of teachers is to bring unexpected situations that can create disequilibrium within the quietness of the class.” He means that everything should not be predictable and solidly established in didactic experiences. It is only when we can produce connections that were not there before that the mind discovers new spaces and produces thoughts in process.

For these reasons, we have followed with particular attention many projects, in which the children and the teachers have the opportunity to reflect and act on the connections of different languages, and when the aesthetic and expressive dimension finds the room that it deserves as a biological need in the processes of knowledge of our species. We are also convinced that this attitude will increase the attention of the world of the school to the encounter of various disciplines with expressive languages. The expressive languages are not only generative in

themselves but they make it possible for the curricular program of schools to find roots in strong human values.

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#### FURTHER RESOURCES

- The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children*. (2011). Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.

# LITERACY IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST CLASSROOM

by Pam Oken-Wright

*Pam Oken-Wright is a teacher-researcher, author and consultant, who has worked with four and five year olds at St. Catherine's School in Richmond, Virginia since 1979. She is a member of the Lugano Research Collaborative for the study of Reggio principles in U.S. contexts and served on the editorial board of Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange. Pam has contributed to Insights and Inspirations from Reggio Emilia: Stories of Teachers and Children from North America, Next Steps Toward Teaching the Reggio Way, Teaching And Learning: Collaborative Explorations of the Reggio Emilia Approach and Authentic Childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the Classroom.*

As the climate in education for literacy fluctuates between battling philosophies and the changing requirements of No Child Left Behind, some important pieces of the process of learning to read and write are in danger of being overlooked. In a social constructivist classroom, where children are in dialogue with their own ideas and those of others through symbolic representation, the missing pieces are already in place.

Put simply, reading and writing are decoding and encoding thoughts, i.e., understanding the thoughts of others and making one's own thoughts visible so that others can understand. So when children are accessing their ideas and making them visible, exploring their own thinking through symbolic representation and communicating ideas that are important to them so that others can understand them, they are not only discovering the pleasure of making their ideas visible and the power of narrative, they are also experiencing on a deep level what readers and writers do.

I propose that if we back away from our assumptions and re-enter the realm of literacy learning for young children, holding onto our image of children as driven toward relationship with people and ideas, and we hold that belief up to our understanding of what

literacy really is at its core, we may find a path toward literacy learning that includes the child as a collaborator in learning to read and write.

On the morning after she lost her first tooth, McKinley came to school excited about her adventure. She told her teacher about it; the teacher recognized that this was a story that might support deeper engagement and suggested to McKinley that she draw the story. McKinley accepted the challenge, drawing distinct elements of the story on separate places on the paper. Then she told the story again, this time supported by both the drawing itself and by the experience of having made her adventure visible. The teacher typed McKinley's story as she dictated and then read it to her aloud, inviting McKinley to stop her if she wanted to change anything. Later, when the class gathered for their morning meeting, McKinley showed her picture to the group and, once again, related her adventure. Each time McKinley told the story, it became more complete and better organized. This is the story as McKinley dictated it:

*Once there was a girl named McKinley. When she went home, she had a loose tooth and she didn't know. And then her mom shook it and she said, "That's your first loose tooth!" And when her brother was playing the piano, he came over and twisted it. She did not like it. She said, "Stop!" Then McKinley got a cup and she spit her blood in it from her tooth. She ate an apple so the*

*tooth would fall out but it didn't. Then she had to go to bed. Then when the brothers were asleep at night, her mother shook the tooth and she twisted it, and she got it out. Then it was in her mother's hand. She got a tissue to see if there was some blood and there was. She put her tooth in a bag and hid it in a book so the tooth fairy wouldn't get it so her dad could see it when he came back.*



McKinley's visual representation of an experience that held deep meaning to her, and the dialogue between drawing and words, paralleled the writing a child

several years older might do...if that child had learned how to access her ideas and make them visible.

That young children can represent their most profound ideas through multiple languages can be a wonderful doorway into literacy. Children who are beginning to explore print may not have the proficiency with text they would need to represent their thinking through independent writing. But they can communicate, express and figure things out through representation in other languages.

### **Symbolic languages**

A medium becomes a language when a child expresses an idea or represents a mental image of something using that medium. Drawing becomes a language when children tell a story through it or draw to help themselves explain something to a friend. Until then, the pen is only a pen. Anything can be a medium for representation. It becomes a language when it is used to communicate, to express or to further understanding. And so, there are myriad languages and myriad ways in which languages can be used.

...when children are accessing their ideas and making them visible, exploring their own thinking through symbolic representation and communicating ideas that are important to them so that others can understand them, they are not only discovering the pleasure of making their ideas visible and the power of narrative, they are also experiencing on a deep level what readers and writers do.

—Pam Oken-Wright





On one of the first days of school, before she knew the other children or had engaged in much collaborative play, Phoebe built the structure around which she is climbing. She did this with a “young lady” (doll) who pounded on each block before laying it down. When the teacher asked what was happening, Phoebe told a synopsis of the story she’d been telling herself as she built: “A young lady is so poor, she has to make the wood with a sewing machine, her daddy’s old one. But she’s mostly getting it from the big giant Phoebe.” Phoebe was using symbolic representation with blocks and people to support her verbal articulation and vice versa.

Drama can be a language as children enact their ideas through dramatic play, when children act out a collaborative story the whole class has written or produce plays they have authored. Painting is a language when children represent a thought, an image or a story. Construction is a language.



Here the language of construction enters into dialogue with the languages of drawing and writing. Claire makes a sign with drawing and words to direct the visitor to the “North Pole,” a complex collaborative construction on the block platform.

A particular medium may be used as a language in many ways. Take drawing, for example. It may be used to tell a story. It can be used to figure out how something works, to understand more deeply a bit of new information or one’s own theory. Drawing can be used to see more clearly, to see something anew. It can be used to illustrate a point or support action, as when a group of children draw a map for the marching band to follow as it travels through the rooms of the school. Children also draw from the imagination and emotion. In all these ways, drawing can support the articulation and communication of one’s ideas, impressions and imagination, which is also one of the greatest tasks of writing. Unfortunately, it seems to be the one least addressed in primary and even preprimary years when, in some classrooms, there seems to be an imbalance in favor of the mechanics of writing and reading.

In addition to representing their own ideas through multiple media, children represent a connection to or relationship with the ideas of others, including stories they have heard. Here a small group is, in a sense, in dialogue with the book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950). They have represented the story with blocks and loose parts by building their image of The Castle at Cair Paravel.



Though the teachers could have invited the children to represent a story that seemed compelling, multiple times in different languages, the adults did not suggest the representations in this article. Once children discover the power and joy of representing their ideas symbolically, they themselves choose to represent whatever idea captures their attention and their imagination; and when collaboration is part of the culture of the classroom, children often organize themselves into groups to bring their ideas forth. I believe that once children experience the pleasure of articulating their ideas in multiple languages and this is encouraged throughout the primary years, in addition to whatever other early literacy experiences are offered, the transition to the same articulation through writing will be fluid and natural.

I believe that once children experience the pleasure of articulating their ideas in multiple languages . . . the transition to the same articulation through writing will be fluid and natural.

—Pam Oken-Wright



Here the children have drawn the story.

## Play as narrative

Another aspect of literacy is an understanding of story form and language. Though young children may not yet have the skills to write or read the text of a complex story independently, they are quite capable of representing complex narrative. We have found that as children engage in supported play over time, their dramatic play seems to become more and more like narrative. After a while, they do more talking about what's going on in the story they are inventing than actual physical play.

Over a few days, a small group of children built a tall castle of blocks. Their subsequent play with the structure was so much like narrative that the teacher commented that their play sounded like a story. "It is!" they agreed. At that point, they began to turn their dramatic play into a story. The children asked the teacher to write their story down. The next day, she took their story back to them, inviting them to listen for anything that didn't make sense or that they wanted to change. The children cut out parts that didn't seem to go anywhere and they added other parts for clarity. The next day, the teacher took the story back to them so the children could remember what they'd written before moving forward with the project. Suddenly, the children realized that they had left the villain of the story...an incorrigible alligator...alive and well! They added a new ending to the story to give the alligator his due. After several days of returning to their story in this way, the children were satisfied.

At one point in the process of revising the story, one of the children proposed that they turn their story into a play. With enthusiastic collaboration, the children built props, assigned roles to small dolls and animals, and made other characters. As the children anticipated performing "The Alligator Under The Bridge" as a play, they began to consider where the audience would sit. They realized that since the action of the play was on the block platform, which had a large structure on it, the audience would have to follow the actors around the platform to see everything. When the teacher saw that the group did not have a solution for this dilemma, she offered the children the option of making the play into a movie and they liked the idea. When completed, the children screened "The Alligator Under The Bridge"

for the rest of the class, their parents and visitors to the classroom for many months.

When children ask, "Can we write a play?" the teacher takes dictation, supporting the collaborative storytelling along the way and the children take it from there. They may design sets and costumes, cast the play, have rehearsals, solicit audiences, make tickets and perform the play with the teacher as narrator. We usually videotape the performance so that the children can revisit their work.

## The role of relationship in literacy learning

Why do we want to become literate? Is it to know the other and to be known? Is it to create a small window into our own thinking and make known who we really are? Relationship has a tremendous role in literacy.

Often among the first words the children write are the names of family and friends. As in other Reggio-inspired schools, we support this by inviting each child to choose a symbol on the first day of school. This symbol, the child's picture and her name are placed on each child's mailbox. Children make letters, pictures and little presents for each other, sign their names, affix their symbols to the little gifts and deliver them to a friend's mailbox. The recipient knows who sent the mail first from the symbol and later, by reading the name. We have cards with all the children's names on them in several places in the classroom so that children can address their mail or write friends' names for other purposes.

In the social constructivist classroom, children learn how to form and sustain relationships...and to love doing it...in part through symbolic representation in languages in which they are fluent. When it comes time to add reading and writing text to their languages, the children know just how to use them for real purposes. The "why" of reading and writing is already apparent.

Communicating and relationship building through symbolic languages extends beyond the classroom. One of the children had complications from a tonsillectomy and missed three weeks of school. When the children complained that they missed her, the teacher invited them to send her an email. The

children dictated the email to the teacher to wish their classmate a speedy recovery, bringing joy to their sick friend and comfort to themselves.

Children also write expressions of compassion themselves, asking for help from a friend or a teacher to translate their thoughts into print. One day, Emmy asked for help to type a letter to Alice on the computer. The teacher offered the help Emmy needed as she thanked Alice for helping her find a moth that day in the outdoor classroom. When she finished typing the letter, Emmy ran to get Alice so that she could read the message to her. Sometimes children believe that text will bear their messages better than the other languages that they know. The teachers are there to support the children's message making and the use of any other symbolic language.

Children also seek each other out for support to represent their ideas through graphic representation or writing, and to read text that they can't figure out. They know each other as experts in particular tasks, from tying shoes to reading. They seek each other out for help to do what they don't know how to do alone.

Literacy also supports relationship with those outside the classroom. When we have adult visitors, the children often take them to traces of the work they have been doing...their portfolios or stories or plays. We engage in "shared writing" of thank you notes to bus drivers, to a member of the community who has visited or to the pet store owner who hosted a field trip. To write these letters, we work collaboratively: the children tell the teacher, who is taking their dictation, how to write the words they have generated as much as they are able and the teacher supplements whatever the children do not know, "thinking aloud" about conventions of writing as she uses them.

Sometimes efforts toward relationship building through text become more sustained. Once a group of children, faced with a decision about what to make for their friends with upcoming birthdays, decided to make books about these friends. The children decided what they wanted to include in the books, and began searching the archives of the daily blog and their friends' portfolios, and "spying" on the friends to see what they did when no one was looking. The children took photographs of the

birthday children over several days, and drew and painted portraits of them. The teacher wanted the children who made the books as well as the recipients to have a copy, so she printed two hard copies of each book. The result was a tangible representation of the children's collective image of their friends.

## **Supporting children's use of text for their own purposes**

Children know that the materials, and textual and human support for reading and writing are always available to them. They learn to trust that the adults will help them realize their intent and they feel free to seek out what they need in order for this to happen.

The environment is as carefully prepared to support children's interaction with print as it is to support all possibilities for learning. Books are available to support any play or work that the children choose. They are also available for research. When a child is trying to draw a shark and doesn't have a complete enough mental image to draw one to her satisfaction, she and the teacher may go looking for pictures in a book, and she'll use the book as a referent to draw the shark. Children also use books and environmental print to play with text and as referents for writing words they want to write.

## **Books of personal import**

We add books of personal meaning to children to the classroom library. For example, children have ready access to their portfolios and they look at them often, alone and with others, to recall experiences they've had and share them with their friends. When a child brings a book from home, we add it to the classroom library so that the children can enjoy it whenever they want.

We also schedule "book time," usually during the transition between snack and outdoor classroom, when everyone looks at books. Sometimes children read books to themselves but most often book reading is a collaborative affair.



We listen for opportunities to encourage children to write as a solution for problems they encounter in play. –Pam Oken-Wright

### Materials and support for writing

Materials for writing are accessible to the children at all times. They use them at the message center, the block platform, the dramatic play area, the sand tray, the light table, anywhere they need to create a written message.

We listen for opportunities to encourage children to write as a solution for problems they encounter in play. We are currently constructing a new outdoor play space. Sod has just been laid and we have been asked not to walk on the grass until it has begun to establish roots. The children knew that we were about to have our big school festival, and that hundreds of people would see our play space and want to explore it. So they wrote signs for the fence: "Please don't walk on the grass," some with

illustrations of growing grass. By this time of year, the children have been writing for their own purposes for a while and so the children making the signs required less help...and knew of several sources of possible assistance. References for writing, such as alphabet strips, environmental print and a word wall are always available, in addition to human help.

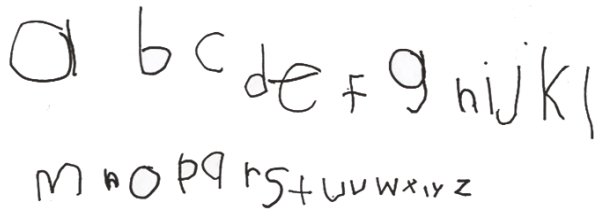
One day, we noticed that one of the frogs in our terrarium had escaped. The children spent the morning on hands and knees with magnifying glasses, hunting for the frog, making paths for it to follow back to the terrarium and posing theories about what happened to it. At one point, one of the children left the hunt to write a message on the chalkboard, a sign of the children's endeavor that lets all who passed know that there was a mystery afoot. Because the children come to believe that they *can*

write and that we *will* help them as much as they need, they do not hesitate to undertake projects that involve writing.





Though children write messages, books, stories and signs, they also engage in exploration of the tools of writing for their own sake.



Catherine wrote the lower case alphabet using an alphabet strip as a referent. When she was finished, she asked if she could write her last name instead of her first because she was so tired. So on the back, instead of "Catherine," she wrote her last name: "Brockenbrough."



*Two children write all the words they know.*

## Collaborative stories

In an effort to support children's symbolic representation, we set up certain protocols and some of them are particular to children's acquisition of literacy. Early in the year, we begin by telling collaborative stories. A teacher begins: "Once there was..." and she invites the children to provide the character or characters. The teacher may offer prompts, such as: "One day..." and "And then..." but only when the children need them. Soon the children are telling collaborative stories on their own. We try to document the stories because the children will often revisit them.

## Story workshop

Once children are comfortable using drawing as a language, we introduce "story workshop."\* The children draw with the idea that something will be

happening in the picture. Then they dictate a story to go with it. As a child tells his story, the teacher records it; this provides an opportunity to support the child's growing sense of story. A witness to the process might hear the teacher say, "What happens then?" or "I'm not understanding that part" or "How will you end your story?" Often the children ask to share their stories with the group and, sometimes, a set of characters or story circumstances becomes part of the culture of the class.

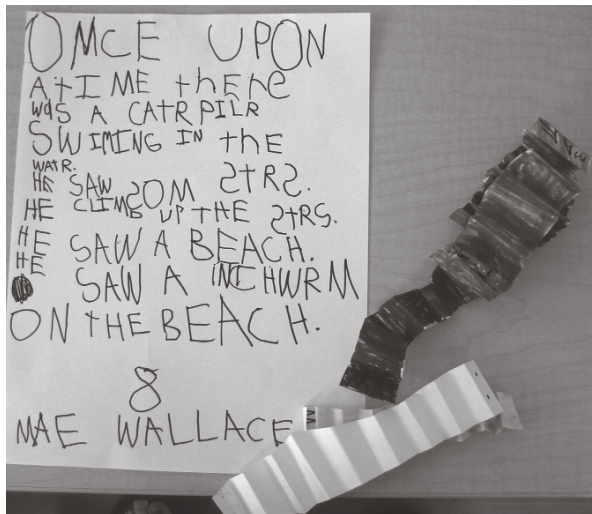
Isabelle's first story workshop story was about an anaconda and she was so enamored of the anaconda in her story that she continued to tell stories about them. Her stories caught the imagination of the other children in her class. As a result, anacondas became an entity in the culture of the group...the subject of the children's play and their plays, of many stories and pictures, even of three-dimensional representation.

Sometimes children represent their imaginations in story workshop stories; sometimes they represent their experiences, as McKinley related the story of losing her first tooth. Once children discover the pleasure in drawing and telling their stories, they tend to choose to engage in story workshop on their own. And they begin to use other languages, from painting to clay to discrete materials, such as natural materials or pattern blocks. Once the children own the story workshop protocol, it tends to become a collaborative venture.

There comes a time when children are interested in writing the words of their stories themselves, which requires a different kind of support from teachers. From drawing to independent story writing, the progression of writing development requires that adults flow with children's growing competence with print.

Mae Wallace wanted to write a story to go with her series of construction paper caterpillars. She took letter dictation for some of the story and heard the sounds in some of the words. This is a great opportunity to share with a child what a writer knows. It is in this way that children learn about sounds and spaces between words, direction of print and conventions of print.

\* Our use of the term "story workshop" was inspired by the Writing Workshop model for older children, introduced by Lucy Calkins et al (Calkins and Harwayne, 1987). The term is used by others and can have different meanings.



One of the ways we gain children's trust that we will help them make their ideas visible is to let them know that we will support them until they are satisfied. We engage children in dialogue about their representation. We have an adult response protocol for supporting children as they grow from drawing toward writing (Oken-Wright, 1998). In short, the progression of support includes:

- The child dictates her story. As the teacher takes dictation, she narrates writing behaviors. For example, she may choose to focus on clarity or story form, or she may focus on the way speech is segmented into words by saying each word as she types or writes it.
- The teacher invites a child who is comfortable writing letters to take letter dictation to write his own stories or messages. This works when the story length and the child's endurance are in sync. When a child has a long story to tell but wants to write some of it herself, we find a way to collaborate with her.
- Whether the teacher is writing the letters for a child or supporting him to write his own letters, she can invite him to hear the sounds of words when he has enough knowledge about print and the confidence to do so.

Armed with the confidence that they can, children eventually set out to write text independently, using invented spelling...writing words the way they sound. It is my opinion that children should continue to dictate their long and imaginative stories as they are developing the language of writing, just as we want

to continue to read aloud to children who are learning to read.

## The morning message

In many early childhood classrooms, the day begins with a "morning message." The morning message is a sort of collaborative problem-solving game. It is just one sentence, written so that all can see it, usually with a meaning that follows the children's recent experiences so that the text has context. Sometimes one or two children will generate the morning message as a gift to the rest of the children. Children and teachers decode the sentence together using context clues, children's knowledge of individual words, parts of words they know, beginning letter and any other clues the text might bear. The morning message is one way in which we share with children what readers do when they read. We offer many other shared reading opportunities but the morning message is one that the children can participate in creating for each other.

Literacy learning has a very strong presence in the social constructivist classroom and it is deeper, broader learning than studying letters or sounds in isolation. The children are developing the disposition (and, therefore, the skills) to write and read for their own purposes. They are learning that becoming literate in multiple languages allows them make their ideas known and helps them to know the other. The children also learn that there is pleasure and power in the process. It inaugurates them as players in the world of remote communication who need letters and words to sustain relationships and to realize their representational intent.

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# EMERGENT CURRICULUM IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM: *Interpreting the Reggio Emilia Approach in Schools*

Carol Anne Wien, Editor

A BOOK REVIEW BY JOHN NIMMO

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In the book, *Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom*, Carol Anne Wien and her collaborators take ideas about inquiry-based education deep into the territory of the early elementary grades. Inspired by what we have learned from our Italian colleagues in Reggio Emilia over the years, the book highlights the need to ground our thinking about these inspirations in our classroom practice. At the heart of this book are nine stories by eleven K-3 teachers and principals from diverse public and private school settings in Canada. As students and collaborators of Carol Anne's, they have been supported by her to seek meaning from the words and experiences of Reggio educators and other contributors to the ongoing dialogue about inquiry-based learning. These teachers display a willingness to look deeply at what they are doing, engage in interpretation and take substantive risks in their practice. Carol Anne tells us that "we are re-creating our own teaching and learning practices, using [Reggio] ideas and practices as reference points and creating our own interpretations of these in our schools" (p.6).

As editor, Carol Anne foregrounds the teacher stories by presenting her framework for thinking about the unique contributions of the Reggio pedagogy, beginning with an image of teachers and children as capable and resourceful. She challenges us to reflect on a stark contrast: "This image in itself invites us to consider standardized, prescriptive, canned and 'teacher-proof' programs inadequate to the creative potential in children and teachers" (p.6). In the book's conclusion, she reminds us that an exploration of how to negotiate the demands of standards was not the

intended focus of the book but it is clearly a theme that weighs heavily on the minds of both her and the teachers. In one of her post teacher-story reflections, Carol Anne writes: "From this project, [the teacher] truly recognized that expectations do not stand in isolation. Although they are written in linear isolation, they are part of a larger whole: children in all the facets of their identities, their cultural backgrounds and the life of the city as it intersects with them. It is within the context of the whole that personal meaning and learning emerges, something that cannot fit neatly into strict time schedules and learning expectations" (p.51).

These stories from elementary classrooms are more about the challenges of finding the space and time for emergent curriculum amid the demands of standards than about the possibilities afforded by this developmental stage. Nancy Thomas seems relieved that the external expectations "were 'covered,' that is, embedded so inherently in the activities that they did not require instruction" (p.24) and Noura Berdoussis found that "the necessary social studies curriculum was successfully covered" through the children's emergent investigation of their city. In her story about Grade 2 children constructing the physics of motion, Shaune Palmer explains, "Some tensions occurred for me in using sections of the curriculum guide as it predefines and 'dictates' what the children will do...However, I was confident that the children would learn a great deal about the topic and meet most of the curriculum expectations through a project that permitted them to interact with a small number of classmates in a focused, in-depth manner" (p.27). I'm reminded of David Hawkin's quote, "You don't want to cover a

...Carol Anne takes stock of the teachers' experiences and reflections to provide us with a framework for responding to her question that includes starting points in emergent curriculum, creating participatory structures and stances, and the creative design work for teachers.

—John Nimmo

subject; you want to uncover it" (Duckworth, 1987). In this sense, the teachers' practice isn't transformative but it does confirm that inquiry and emergent curriculum belong in classrooms beyond the preschool years.

The teacher stories follow as wonderfully reflective journals about their varied adventures with emergent curriculum. For instance, Susan Hislop and Jennifer Armstrong explore the social construction of measurement by first grade girls, while Diana Wills draws us into her own arduous journey to engage a second-grader in authentic inquiry. Through their stories, they offer us insight into many of the processes, tools, challenges and possibilities they encounter along the way. The teachers engage in a recursive loop that begins with their profound questions about theory and philosophy, finds action through the small details of curriculum and pedagogy, and returns to shifts in teacher thinking and further questions. Wills, for instance, offers us this reflection on her journey with a child seeking to understand lightning: "...she taught me about the more divergent paths to inquiry for some students. She made me question what it means to inquire and how to create a culture of inquiry in the classroom" (p.113).

Some of the references to Reggio concepts and ideas are not fully explained by the teacher storytellers; they seem to assume that readers are engaged in a parallel process of interpreting these ideas. This assumption made me think of my upcoming class of young undergraduates and how I could use this text with them as novices to inquiry-based teaching and learning. While they may not be able to relate to the passion of the veteran teachers as they struggle with

the demands of external standards, I believe that the stories are accessible and demonstrate the rightful role of the teacher as an active decision-maker in emergent curriculum. These decision points are grounded in detailed observations and honest reflections about their classrooms. The teachers model a willingness to take risks and to seek change. For some of the teachers, there is uneasiness about what might unfold. In Noula Berdoussis' story about children's theory development in a Grade 1 classroom, she writes, "Sometimes it was difficult as a teacher to deal with the uncertainty of attempting an emergent curriculum" (p.97). These feelings are outweighed by the joy and excitement the teachers experience as they make new discoveries about teaching and learning. In the thick of scaffolding their kindergarteners' wire representations of a bicycle, Vanessa Barnett and Deborah Halls comment, "As teacher-researchers, we were as engaged as the children...we felt so deeply invested in the work" (p.60).

Through the teacher stories, we gain insight into another question posed by Carol Anne in her introduction: "What range of moves, skills and capacities, sensitivities and sensibilities does a teacher who works in emergent curriculum encompass, and what values... inform the choices among moves that teachers make" (p.16)? In the final chapter, Carol Anne takes stock of the teachers' experiences and reflections to provide us with a framework for responding to her question that includes starting points in emergent curriculum, creating participatory structures and stances, and the creative design work for teachers. There are too many insights to mention here but a couple of themes particularly caught my eye. First, the role of emotions in providing a kind of fuel for both teacher and child engagement in inquiry and the

process of collaboration that Carol Anne calls the “windhorse effect,” borrowing from a secular Buddhist tradition. Referring to the contagious energy generated as emergent curriculum takes hold in a classroom, she writes: “This positive energy draws others in around it – parents, visitors – creating larger circles of positive energy that spin out into the community. It is, initially, a by-product of creative activity and then a kind of fuel for further learning and activity” (p.15). In a story about how preschoolers explored sound, music and instruments, teacher Nancy Thomas likens the emotional response of her children to electricity and says, “...it is really being ‘alive.’ Every part of the classroom has a sense of wonder, of brightness. It’s an alertness, a sense of participation that something special is going to happen or is happening” (p.24).

Another theme is Carol Anne’s exploration of the specifics of the teachers’ pedagogical choices as they practice emergent curriculum: When do I intervene and how? For instance, she refers to a different type of question the teachers used as part of truly understanding the child’s system of thinking: “...[the questions] were neither open (allowing any response, as in social chat) nor closed (requiring an answer the teacher already knows), but rather they invited the children to think their own thoughts, generate theories, and hypothesize possibilities around a chosen topic. The quality of reflecting on what we think led me to the phrase ‘questions as seeds of thinking,’ a way for teachers to provoke or probe more focused thinking in children” (pp. 153-154). I’m impressed that these teachers spend little time being distracted by the pressure on elementary school teachers to ask questions and to teach, in general, in order to lead children to a pre-determined set of facts. Their focus is squarely on how to develop a culture of inquiry in their classrooms.

Emergent curriculum is an imperfect term that focuses our attention on important elements of inquiry-based learning, while also leaving room for misinterpretation. For instance, in the book *Emergent Curriculum* (Jones & Nimmo, 1994), published almost seventeen years ago, Betty Jones and I noted some of these potential misunderstandings literally right on the cover! In Carol Anne’s book, she offers one of the most eloquent definitions of the term that I’ve encountered and makes certain to emphasize the active role of the teacher (see pp. 5-6). Carlina Rinaldi (2006) has also raised concerns about the limitations of the term in describing the Reggio Emilia experience and has suggested “contextual curriculum” (as one translation of the Italian term *progettazione*) as a way to emphasize the importance of the active participation of children, teachers, families, place and the community in the dialogue that determines the direction of the curriculum in the broadest sense (p. 160).

The stories in *Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom* are set in private and public schools serving culturally and economically diverse populations of children and families. While in some ways, the teachers do not reflect directly on the impact of these contexts on the threads of curriculum they identify and nurture, and families are noticeably left out of the picture, their stories still clearly reflect the challenges and possibilities that each context invites. At some point, we must interpret what we have learned from Reggio Emilia through the lens of our own experiences and our own unique contexts. The teachers in this book are very clear about the uncertainty and necessity of this process but have taken the risk of documenting and sharing this process with us. We have much to learn and there will be new questions to ask.

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North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

# The Presence of "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" Exhibit in Chicago, Illinois

*by Kristin Brizzolara, Karen Haigh and Jesús Oviedo*

*Kristin Brizzolara is an Educational Consultant in Chicago. Karen Haigh is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education at Columbia College Chicago as well as Project Manager for the RELAY Project, in which she works with Head Start Education Coordinators. She is also a consultant for the Chicago Public Schools. Jesús Oviedo is a Studio Coordinator for Chicago Commons Child Development Program. "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit was in Chicago from June 15-November 30, 2011. The following is based on excerpts from Chicago's final exhibit report, which was submitted to NAREEA and Reggio Children.*

Bringing the exhibit to Chicago involved a complex, intensive and extensive collaborative process. It included not only working cooperatively with Reggio Children and the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREEA) but also with the city government, a local college, a social service agency, a Chicago-based museum, and various representatives of the local early childhood community and their affiliations. The collaborative group that brought the exhibit to Chicago, referred to as "Crossroads in Chicago," included the City of Chicago's Department of Family and Support Services, Columbia College Chicago, Chicago Commons and the Chicago Children's Museum. It is impressive to note each entity's commitment and dedication to promote quality care and education for young children through this exhibit.

Additionally, many representatives from other Chicago area organizations served as Exhibit Committee members working to support the exhibit, and its related events and professional development

experiences. Many of the people on Chicago's Exhibit Committee became interested in supporting Chicago's hosting of the "The Wonder of Learning" exhibit as a result of their participation in the Five-State Study Tour to Reggio Emilia, Italy in 2008 with educators from Arizona, California, New Mexico and Missouri.

The City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services funded the exhibit, opening reception and professional development initiative expenses. Columbia College Chicago donated the exhibit space and the venue for most of the professional development experiences.

The Sixth NAREEA Summer Conference, "Dialogues for Quality in Education: Our Image of Children, Our Image of Teachers, Our Image of Learning, Our Responsibility" was held in Chicago in June 2010 in connection with the opening of the exhibit. Mayor Graziano Delrio, Carlina Rinaldi and Amelia Gambetti represented the Reggio Emilia municipality and

*The collaborative group that brought the exhibit to Chicago, referred to as “Crossroads in Chicago,” included the City of Chicago’s Department of Family and Support Services, Columbia College Chicago, Chicago Commons and the Chicago Children’s Museum.*

*It is impressive to note each entity’s commitment and dedication to promote quality care and education for young children through this exhibit.*

*Kristin Brizzolara, Karen Haigh and Jesús Oviedo*

municipal early childhood education project through multiple presentations related to the topic of the conference. An optional day of school visits was offered, and included Chicago Commons Child Development Program, Chicago Public Schools (Belmont Cragin and Velma Thomas) and Christopher House sites. The opening reception for the exhibit included the participation of Mayor Richard Daley, Mayor Graziano Delrio, Commissioner Mary Ellen Caron, and Columbia College President Warrick Carter and Dean Deborah Holdstein.

Other professional development initiatives connected to the presence of the exhibit focused on connecting theory and practice related to young children's learning; advocacy for children and teachers while supporting authentic, contextual learning; meaningful and dynamic professional development that impacts children, educators and parents; and the role of culture with learning.

Here are some notable quotations from the various professional development initiatives that were organized in connection with "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit:

*Documentation shows the learning process. It helps you to know how to relate to the children.*

—Dr. Carla Rinaldi

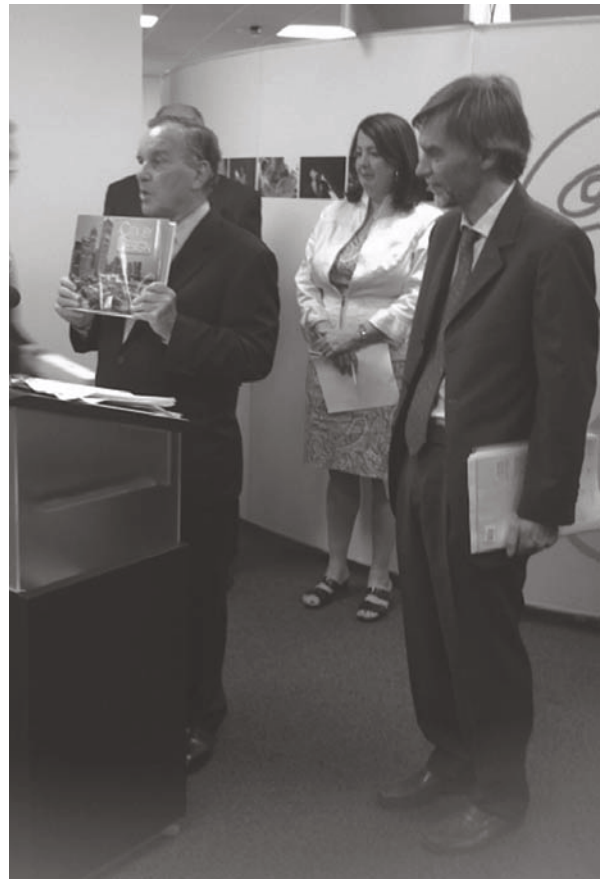
*Educators are the first constructors of our city.*

—Mayor Graziano Delrio

*When you work together, you relieve anxiety about not knowing.* —Dr. Jie Qi Chen

*Collaboration is when everyone's point of view is respected and we think together.* —Mary Hartzell

*Build on the strengths of the child's lived experience and cultural knowledge.* —Dr. Antonia Darder



Mayor Richard Daley (l), Commissioner Mary Ellen Caron (m) and Mayor Graziano Delrio (r)

## **Reflections on the impact of the exhibit from Karen Haigh**

As many of us know, studying and reflecting upon others' approaches to learning provokes us to reflect upon our own approaches to learning and challenges us to revisit, reconsider, further explore and adapt learning strategies and understandings related to our

context. Lately, some educators have been prohibited from traveling to visit other programs especially those in other countries, due to funding issues. However, becoming isolated, unaware and less knowledgeable of other programs' and/or countries' educational systems, learning strategies, understandings and values limits and seriously hampers our own advancement in learning and teaching. Widespread travel limitations, while seeming cost efficient, are unwise if we want to advance our own learning and connect to others!

I think the exhibit played three key roles in the Chicago community. First, it promoted extraordinary and complex collaborations with colleagues in the Chicago area as well as colleagues in the exhibit host communities of Indianapolis and Santa Monica. Second, it provoked educators, parents and even the general public to revisit the meaning of learning and learning strategies. Lastly, it caused us all to once again revisit our image of children, educators and parents.

### **Reflections on the impact of the exhibit from Jesús Oviedo**

"The Wonder of Learning" exhibit has had a substantial impact on Chicago's community of educators and policy makers. This is evidenced by the presence of Mayor Daley of Chicago, City Commissioner Caron and Mayor Delrio of Reggio Emilia at the opening reception. Commissioner Caron stated that she wants educators and policymakers to think about the image of the child. In this sense, the exhibit can be seen as an instrument for social change.

Additionally, for many frontline educators, the exhibit has served as a tool for professional development. Local educators, and some as far as Canada, organized visits to the exhibit for their staff. One administrator said that this was a good way for teachers who have not had a chance to visit Reggio Emilia to experience some of the stories from the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio.

Finally, the exhibit has served as a way of making connections between Reggio-inspired educators who are not familiar with each other. Several educators

from the area have made contact with each other, visited each other's schools and discussed collaboration.

### **Possibilities for the future**

Crossroads in Chicago was created for the purposes of hosting the exhibit and we would like to work toward establishing it as a 501c3 non-profit organization that:

- organizes a preconference day at the local Chicago Metro AEYC conference for those interested in Reggio-inspired early childhood education;
- shares upcoming Reggio-inspired professional development initiatives;
- coordinates workshops for those interested in the Reggio Emilia philosophy and experience;
- supports consulting for local programs wanting to pursue Reggio ideals and practices; and
- posts job announcements for programs or teachers interested in Reggio-inspired early childhood education.

As a result of our collaborative efforts in hosting the exhibit, we may create a book on children's, teachers' and parents' explorations and understanding of the City of Chicago. In addition, we hope to coordinate a study tour to Reggio Emilia for educators from the Chicago area with the possibility of bringing the spouses of key politicians such as our new mayor's wife, Mrs. Emanuel, and our senators' wives, Mrs. Durbin, Mrs. Kirk and Mrs. Madigan, along with some key funders like the McCormick Foundation. Before and after, we plan to reflect upon the goals and purpose of this leadership study tour.

We would like to express our deep appreciation to all of the volunteers who worked on the exhibit, the reception and the professional development initiatives for their services and time.

## RESOURCES RELATED TO THE REGGIO EMILIA PHILOSOPHY

### MESSAGE FROM THE OFFICE OF REGGIO CHILDREN, s.r.l.

The office of Reggio Children, s.r.l., is pleased that there is so much interest in our infant centers, preprimary schools and educational philosophy. We note with pride the number of resources published, which focus specifically on the Reggio Emilia approach to education. We caution interested educators that some print and video resources purporting to present material concerning the Reggio Emilia approach do not accurately reflect our experiences and philosophy. In order to ensure respectful representation of ideas concerning Reggio, we urge authors, publishers and producers of resources concerning the Reggio Emilia approach to coordinate their plans with Reggio Children, s.r.l., via Bligny 1/a, 42100 Reggio Emilia, Italy, 39-0522-513752, fax 39-0522-920414, [reggiochildren@reggiochildren.it](mailto:reggiochildren@reggiochildren.it), [www.reggiochildren.it](http://www.reggiochildren.it)

For a comprehensive listing of resources related to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, contact:  
**North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA)**  
[www.reggioalliance.org](http://www.reggioalliance.org)

**Resources Published by Reggio Children**  
Available from: **Learning Materials Workshop**  
800-693-7164, [mail@learningmaterialswork.com](mailto:mail@learningmaterialswork.com)  
[www.learningmaterialswork.com/shop/reggio.html](http://www.learningmaterialswork.com/shop/reggio.html)

**New Resource from Reggio Emilia:**  
*"The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children."* (2011). Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.

### NORTH AMERICAN STUDY GROUPS IN REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY

**North American Study Group: October 15-22, 2011**  
For more information, contact: Angela Ferrario, U.S. Liaison for Study Groups to Reggio Emilia & Reggio Children International Network representative,  
508-473-8001, [aferrario@comcast.net](mailto:aferrario@comcast.net)

### CONFERENCE CALENDAR

*Due to space considerations, the Conference Calendar is not included in the Spring 2011 issue of Innovations.*  
For information about professional development initiatives related to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, see *Conferences & Initiatives* page of NAREA website: [http://www.reggioalliance.org/reggio\\_related/conferences\\_and\\_initiatives.php](http://www.reggioalliance.org/reggio_related/conferences_and_initiatives.php)

### CONTACTS FOR REGGIO CHILDREN

**Angela Ferrario**, Reggio Children Liaison for U.S. Study Tours, [aferrario@comcast.net](mailto:aferrario@comcast.net)

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**Lella Gandini**, Reggio Children Liaison in the U.S. for Dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach  
[lellagandini@gmail.com](mailto:lellagandini@gmail.com)

**NAREA**, North American Reggio Emilia Alliance  
[www.reggioalliance.org](http://www.reggioalliance.org)

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### "THE WONDER OF LEARNING - THE HUNDRED LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN" A NEW EXHIBIT FROM REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY - NORTH AMERICAN VERSION

"The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" is the newest North American version of "The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit that has been touring the United States, Canada and Mexico since 1987. The Municipality of Reggio Emilia has entrusted the management of this exhibit to Reggio Children. NAREA has agreed to manage the organization and coordination of the exhibit in collaboration with Reggio Children and representatives of hosting communities throughout North America. For more information, log onto "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" website [[www.thewonderoflearning.com](http://www.thewonderoflearning.com)] and the Exhibit Project section of the NAREA website [[www.reggioalliance.org/exhibit\\_project.php](http://www.reggioalliance.org/exhibit_project.php)].

#### June-November 2011: Monterey County, California

"The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit will be in Salinas, California from June 15-November 15, 2011. The exhibit will be hosted by First 5 Monterey County and other community partners at the National Steinbeck Center. For more information, contact NSC Guest Services [[admin@steinbeck.org](mailto:admin@steinbeck.org)].

A series of professional development initiatives will be organized in connection with the presence of "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit in Monterey County, including:

**October 15, 2011:** Reggio-Inspired California Educators Explore the Role of Dialogue

**November 12, 2011:** Excellence and Accessibility in Publicly Funded Reggio-Inspired Programs  
Speaker: Lella Gandini

For updated information about "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" Exhibit, log onto the Exhibit - Current Version page of the NAREA website:  
[\[www.reggioalliance.org/exhibit\\_project/current\\_version.php\]](http://www.reggioalliance.org/exhibit_project/current_version.php).



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