

Vision

The more time you spend with children, the more you notice how inquisitive they are about the world and how keen is their thinking even about the most subtle things—things which escape materiality, easy recognition, definite forms, and the laws of invariance, things you can touch but can't touch, that brush against the real and imaginary, that have something of the mysterious about them and offer wide margins of interpretation.

—LORIS MALAGUZZI

The view we have of children is present in all that we do as educators. It can be seen in the way we present materials, the way we maintain our spaces, and even the food we serve. For example, do students eat reheated lunch on paper plates? What does this say about the view of the child as competent or valuable? What does it say about the value the program places on food or eating together or the sense of community? Is the bathroom door always closed, so children do not go without supervision? What does this say about the program's understanding of children as independent or, again, competent? Are materials creatively displayed at a child's level for easy access and inspection, or in a closed cabinet that only teachers are supposed to open? Each choice springs from a different understanding of the child's place in the classroom and the teacher's role.

In any educational project a vision underlies the work and is tied directly to your view of the child. Opinions about the place of children in society and the role that the education of children plays in their development are also influential. Carla Rinaldi, one of the best-known voices associated with Reggio Emilia, was a pedagogical coordinator or *pedagogista* in the Reggio Emilia programs. Eventually she became the director of Early Childhood Education in Reggio Emilia. Ms. Rinaldi is now the executive consultant to Reggio Children, the international institution devoted to research and the dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. In "The Thought that Sustains Educational Action (A Pedagogical Approach that Gives Form to Things and Does Not Inhibit the Form of Things)" (Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children, 2002), she shares some fundamental questions that can begin to give shape to your view of the child and create a foundation for the vision upon which your school will function:

- Who is a child?
- What is childhood?
- How do we learn?
- How do children learn?
- What is the meaning of *to educate*?
- What is the relationship between teaching and learning?
- What is the relationship between theory and practice?
- What is the role of school in society?
- What is the relationship between school and research? And what is the relationship between schools for young children and research?
- What is the relationship between school and education?

Your first task in this book is to begin to answer these questions for yourself. Your answers to these questions will shape the work you do in the rest of this book and ultimately the work you do with children. Please keep in mind that this may take a significant amount of time and reflection on the experiences you have already had working with young children. Permit yourself the opportunity to explore these questions slowly and in depth, and be aware that your answers to them will change over time as you think about them more and more deeply. It is not a question of right and wrong answers, but of determining what you really believe about children and education, and then making sure that all the millions of decisions you make as you work with children reflect that vision to the best of your capacity. Give yourself permission to revisit and revise your answers as you work. Consider them works in progress. Continue reading this chapter with these questions in mind before trying to write anything down. It is important to always keep in mind that you are not trying to replicate what is believed in Reggio nor replicate the schools, as cultural restraints make that impossible. However, you can articulate what is true for you and culturally relevant in the United States.

On this note, it is worth examining the change in the United States of the view of children in the last twenty-five years. Recently the television show *60 Minutes* featured a program by correspondent Steve Kroft on Americans' changing view of children (October 3, 2004). The show discussed the "echo boomers," also known as "Generation Y" or the "millennials": a generation of Americans that spans from children now attending elementary school to young adults just out of college. According to historian Neil Howe, who has made a career of studying different generations, "They came along at a time when we started re-valuing kids. During the '60s and '70s, the frontier of reproductive medicine was contraception. During the '80s and beyond, it's been fertility and scouring the world to find orphan kids that we can adopt. . . . The culture looked down on kids. Now it wants kids; it celebrates them." (www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/01/60_minutes/main646890.shtml). According to Howe, this group of children has been scheduled with classes and extra-curricular activities as never seen before in the United States.

One interesting finding of this research is that part of our society does not view the child as powerful, competent, and strong, but rather sees children as weak and in need of protection. "Parents feel as if they're holding onto a piece of Baccarat crystal or something that could somehow shatter at any point," says Dr. Mel Levine, who has studied the echo boomers at the University of North Carolina. "Parents really

have a sense that their kids are fragile.” According to Levine, children in this generation are not usually left to their own devices to pursue their imagination or interests. This phenomenon is part of the culture surrounding preschool programs in the United States. While this may not be your individual view, it is likely to be the view of at least some of the parents who bring their children to your school. As you think about this perception, you may discover ways that you also see children as fragile. This is the kind of cultural factor that must be considered when you think about how to adapt the Reggio approach to make it work in an American program.

Your View of the Child

In your journal, reflect on and record your responses to the following questions:

- Who is a child?
- What is childhood?
- How do we learn?
- How do children learn?
- What is the meaning of *to educate*?
- What is the relationship between teaching and learning?
- What is the relationship between theory and practice?
- What is the role of school in society?
- What is the relationship between school and research? And what is the relationship between schools for young children and research?
- What is the relationship between school and education?

Don't try to make your responses perfect. There really are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The journal should be an evolving record of your thinking, which will change as your practice changes. The form does not matter—you can use bullet points, a list of words, or short paragraphs. Simply begin responding to the best of your ability. Ideally, this continued exercise of stating and re-working your views will frame a great deal of the work that follows—not only your thinking about children, but what you translate from this book into your practice.

Remember that by examining and declaring your own values about children and education, as well as your view of the child, you are

making a commitment to manifest these values in your work. In the projects you do, in the spaces you create, in the words you use with your students, when a decision must be made regarding your school in any capacity, it must be in keeping with your stated values, or the values must be revised.

Ideally, as you progress through the book and work through many of the other exercises, you will see where what you believe about children and what you are doing in your program are different. When this happens, it is important to relieve the tension between the two by either making shifts in your program or revising the values stated here. This will cause serious reflection, and the cognitive dissonance that ensues may actually be uncomfortable. That is okay. This is what it means to be a reflective practitioner, and it is difficult work.

The Image of the Child in Reggio Emilia

Mara Davoli, the *atelierista* at Pablo Neruda, told me that the *ingresso*, or entryway to the school, makes the first impression on anyone who enters the schools and is very important in communicating with visitors about the work done with children, both how the work is done and why it is done as it is—in short, the school's view of the child and of education. For example, in the *ingresso* at Pablo Neruda one of the walls had a large panel of documentation of student work, while another wall had photos of the teachers and other staff as well as little summaries of projects that were ongoing in each of the three classrooms. A third wall held information about community initiatives. Bookshelves on the fourth wall held books that had come as gifts from delegations, documentation books from previous years, and more academic books published by Reggio Children. There were places to sit and a few well-maintained plants as well.

When one entered, the *ingresso* immediately demonstrated great care and attention to detail. It also had a comfortable, lived-in feeling, although quite elegant and professional—no primary colored plastic or writing done to mimic children's print. There were no children's handprints or class sets of artwork displayed. There were panels of documentation, using the children's words and work as organized by the teachers and *atelierista* to share the questions explored through their work. The process of inquiry may not have arrived at a concrete answer and may

have even raised more questions; however, it was the process that was displayed. Through these documentation boards, the *ingresso* communicated immediately that children were respected and taken seriously here.

Before you read further, take a minute or two to think about the Pablo Neruda *ingresso* as described above. What view of the child is expressed by such a space? In your journal, make a list of words describing the image of the child that might be expressed by an entryway like this one.

In Reggio the child is viewed as strong, powerful, rich in potential, driven by the power of wanting to grow, and nurtured by adults who take this drive towards growth seriously. The curiosity of children makes them question and research the reasons for all that surrounds them. This is childhood, for the schools of Reggio. This image of the child is drawn from educational, psychological, and sociological sources, as well as the everyday experience of children at the Reggio schools. In addition, the image of the child is drawn from the relationships among children and their parents, friends, and extended family that are observed daily. This understanding of children, education, and childhood influences everything that happens in the Reggio schools.

For instance, in Reggio, “wait time,” or giving children time to come to their own understandings, is seen as critical to the process of education. Teachers may leave what seems to Americans like a huge amount of time between conversations on a given subject. The students are given the time to make connections to their own world, in their own time, as competent individuals. This is very much in keeping with the Reggio schools’ stated view of the child as competent: if we see children as competent to construct their own knowledge, then the children must be given time to do this.

In another example, children in Reggio have access to the bathrooms without adult supervision. If they need to use the bathroom, they do. They may do so with their friends or classmates, but they are not required to go in pairs or as a whole class. If the children need help, they ask for it. They are permitted to decide on their own whether or not they need help. In addition, the environment is geared to the children in the bathrooms as well as in the rest of the school. The sink is at the children’s level so they are able to turn on the water and wash their hands without assistance. The tops of the mirrors in the bathrooms at Neruda are hung by small chains—the bottom of the mirror is flush against the wall while the top hangs a few inches out, so that the whole mirror is angled slightly down towards the floor. The mirrors reflect the images of the children

while the adults can only see their legs! This is a clear statement about who the bathrooms are for and about children’s worth.

These three features of the Reggio programs are just some examples of the way this image of the child is manifested in the practice of the teachers in Reggio. There will be more examples in the chapters to come.

Values in American Schools

While traveling around the United States to share my experiences, I had the opportunity to visit many schools that were well-known and taken quite seriously as places of learning for young children. Many of them had lovely spaces and thoughtful, reflective practitioners who worked with children in engaging ways. And yet there were often significant gaps between the professed view of the child and the actual practice in these schools. I often had the sense that schools had tried to adopt the Reggio view of the child without deeply examining their own values, their cultural context, their setting, and the community of staff, children, and families.

For example, I once received an e-mail from a school I had visited asking me to share “the objective and materials” for a Reggio project I had spoken about (*colore tra le mani*, discussed in chapter 4, page 76). While I appreciated the interest, it is not possible to approach the project this way. The curriculum in Reggio grows from the teachers, children, and families in those schools and from their cultural context. There are not objectives from the outset of a project in Reggio. Teachers are not forced to align their work with standards or readiness guidelines. This is a different way of conceptualizing one’s work from the way we think about teaching and young children in the United States. In some ways we must abandon what we think we know about educating young children to permit ourselves and the children the freedom to explore.

Similarly, American teachers often say they see children as competent while creating environments that limit their movement or initiating projects that are driven by what teachers think children should learn. What adults think children should learn usually has no correlation to what children want to learn.

Loris Malaguzzi said that a teacher’s goal is not so much to “facilitate” learning in the sense of “making it smooth or easy” but rather to “stimulate” it by making problems more complex, engaging,

and difficult. That is something to consider carefully. The work with children in Reggio Emilia is the work of teacher-researchers who are always thinking both about the children and about their own practice and how it reflects their values about children and education.

To do this work, teachers and schools must first examine their views of children and education before proceeding with Reggio-inspired practices. To see the work and try it without first examining your views and establishing a vision is putting the cart before the horse. After establishing a vision, the next step is to look at what already exists at your school and begin asking yourself questions, taking notes, while beginning to move all elements of your school and work with children towards your stated vision. This is easy for me to summarize in two sentences, but the Reggianni have been working on it since the end of World War II. After more than fifty years, this process is refined, and the alignment between values and manifestation is much greater than in places where this reflective practice is just beginning. Remember that it takes time to achieve that alignment.

I once heard a story told by the director of a child care center in the United States. Amelia Gambetti, who works for Reggio Children and does a great deal of work with American schools, went to this director's school and remained in the lobby for the first thirty minutes. She asked the staff questions like, "What does this communicate about your view of the child?" as she pointed to different elements of the entryway in the school. The director became alarmed, thinking to herself, "What will happen when she sees the remainder of the school?" This story makes me smile because only that straightforward questioning will push your practice forward. Simple questions about how our values and our practice are not yet aligned are often difficult to answer. Many times they involve details of our programs that we have not yet noticed. It is a challenge to recognize that by not taking the time to make choices regarding these details, we in fact have passively made choices that do not reflect our values.

Take a Look at Your Practice

With this in mind, and taking along your responses to the first set of questions on page 14, walk around your classroom and school, making notes to yourself about what you see. Really look at what is there. This is one of the first steps American educators can take towards working in

Reggio ways. Sometimes it is too difficult to really see what surrounds us daily. If so, ask a colleague or friend to come to your school and make notes. They do not have to be early childhood educators to make observations on what they see. Fresh eyes are useful.

As you walk around, take notes for yourself, but try to avoid making judgments. Ask yourself questions about the environment, the routines, the curriculum planning: Why are the plant leaves dusty or limp from lack of watering? Why are there fake plants instead of real ones? Why are many of the toys stored out of reach of children? Could the storage areas be covered to create a more pleasing aesthetic sense? Are there boxes of old materials stored on top of cabinets? Why do the children eat on paper plates? Why is the food made the previous day and reheated?

These sample questions come straight out of notes from centers I have visited in the United States. They certainly do not apply to all centers, but some questions of this type will apply to your center. Here are some others: How are materials presented? Is the restroom accessible to children at all times? Is the documentation at an adult's eye level or a child's? Where do the children eat? Where do they rest? What do they rest on? Is the outdoor space cement with a play structure? Is there adequate natural light? Does the air move freely throughout your school? Are there mirrors for children to see themselves?

Whatever their answers to the more complex questions you discussed in your journals, any early childhood educator in the United States would likely say they see children as having value. If we say we view children as having value, we have to ask ourselves what the value we place on children looks like on a day-to-day basis. Try to see your space from the viewpoint of a child. Get on your knees and walk around. Look up: What do you see? Look at the walls. Are they stimulating? Are they orderly? Clean? What are the clothes like in the dress-up area—adult hand-me-downs or child-sized fantasy clothes? In the house-play area, are the kitchen implements real or from a kitchen kit for children? Does the environment hold your attention? Do you want to stare at the light sparkles made from a hanging prism? Are musical instruments available? Are there places for the children to interact with one another both inside and outside? Are there safe "nooks" for two or three children to go to on their own? How are the blocks in the construction area stored? Is there a construction area? House-play? Dress-up?

These are sample questions; you will be able to think of many others that are relevant to your setting and program. Make careful notes to

yourself, knowing that you will revisit them throughout the book. This is not the time to begin with criticism but instead to begin opening up possibilities.

Real-Life Examples

In working with teachers from a number of different parts of the United States, I have seen many programs begin working through questions like those asked above. Here are a couple of examples of programs' discussions and the compromises they reached to begin aligning their values with their practice.

In one school the director and owner both made strong cases for their view of the child as competent and valuable. Many things about their program reflected this value, but mealtimes and rest time seemed problematic. The children ate off paper plates in shifts, in groups of fifteen at a time. Once they were finished, they moved to the rest area to rest while other children took their turn to eat lunch.

These practices raised many questions as we observed, but the most obvious was about the plates. Why did the children eat on paper plates? Was it possible to use plastic or ceramic plates that could be washed? What did paper plates communicate to children about their value?

There is a notable difference in a meal served on a paper plate versus something more substantial. It is like being on a perpetual picnic. It directly affects the ways students behave, the amount of food eaten, and the treatment of the eating area. Overall, it changes the nature of mealtime to something hurried and unimportant.

In discussion, we discovered that the teachers thought using ceramic plates would create too much clean-up work and were worried about children dropping plates and breaking them. Nonetheless, they clearly saw the importance of changing the most basic elements of the lunch routine to create something more significant, in keeping with their declared view of children. When I left, they were working on ways to put into practice their view of children as valuable and competent.

In this same school we discussed the way the children rotated to the rest area while some children still ate. Was it possible for all of the children to get a real rest with so much activity going on while they were trying to settle down? The conversation that ensued brought up issues of management and convenience for the teachers. At the same time, the discussion kept returning to what they had stated as their view of the

child and their vision of a school for young children. Teachers recognized that if the management of the children was going to take precedence over the development of the children, then the vision would need to be revisited. The staff recognized that these are not small changes to make, but they were receptive and eager to begin because they saw that the benefits to the children would be enormous.

Beginning the Change Process

As these examples show, in order to work with authenticity, it is not enough to define your view of the child—you must also work to put this vision into practice. This is no small task, but once it takes root, the program will be a powerful manifestation of well thought-out values. Take some time to look at the answers to those first questions about your view of children and education, and compare them to your observations of your own school.

Go back to your notebook and read over your observations. Then look over the answers you provided to the questions articulated by Carlina Rinaldi. What do you see? First, look at the places where your view of the child is reflected in your program. Make sure you take note of the things you are already doing that are in alignment with your vision. I am sure there are many.

Now make a list of five aspects of your program that do not reflect your values about children. Five is enough to start with. Have you said you see children as independent, but the children do not have independent access to the restrooms? Perhaps there is a way to hang mirrors so you could see the children in the bathroom and then leave it open for their access and exploration. Do you believe children construct their own knowledge, yet the school is not print-rich with books and magazines at a level accessible to children? Perhaps you could begin to place baskets of reading materials in a variety of places around the school—in the entryway, bathrooms, common area, and so forth—so children can get to them as desired. Did you say childhood is about exploration and discovery, but the materials are put away at the end of each day? The children may need several days to complete a painting or construction project. Perhaps you can find a way to leave their work on the easel or in the block area for days in order for them to revisit it. Or if this is not possible, perhaps you can photograph or draw their work from one day so they can use it as a departure point the next time they come to school.

This list-making will take some thought and time. Give yourself the time to do so. Share your lists with a colleague, and ask her opinion on what parts of your program do not reflect your values. Sit with it for a while. This part of your exploration will probably take weeks or even months, and the examination of your program in light of your values will continue as long as you work with children. That is not to say you cannot continue to read and reflect, but spend the time necessary to lay the proper foundation upon which you will work. The questions posed by Carlina Rinaldi will not be answered in one sitting or even several. You may answer the first one or two and think about others. Then you will tour your school and take notes on one day and then another, perhaps with colleagues on different occasions. The idea here is to gather information to inform your views and practice. Take the time necessary to do so.

Once you have written your list of five, rank them in order of importance. We will continue to return to this list throughout the book as a vehicle for your professional development. Over time, as you become more comfortable with the process of questioning yourself and looking at your program, you will revise this list, subtracting items as you take care of them and adding others. Soon, the process of questioning, reflecting, and resolving the conflicts between your values and your practice will become second nature to you.