

Creativity Comes Dressed in Everyday Clothes

by Lella Gandini

"Creative? Me? No way!"

"Creativity is a gift — you either have it or you don't."

"I'm not at all creative, I can't even draw a line, I'm not the one to help children be creative."

"Sure it would be nice to do creative activities with the children, but there's limited money for art materials."

Educators like these hold a passive concept of creativity. For them, creativity is equated only with artistic expression, a mere accessory to the learning experience. Children in their classrooms are not encouraged to venture into their own ideas — to explore, to experiment, to risk.

But there is another, well-researched (Hendrick) definition that, when applied, can transform early childhood classrooms into exciting, stimulating workshops where busy minds are engaged in problem-solving. By this definition, creativity is the production of *novel* thoughts, solutions, and/or products based on previous experience and knowledge. It follows directly that:

- Creativity can emerge both from the process and from the results of children's learning experiences.
- Novel thoughts, solutions, and products can be brought forth by different types of learning, not only when children are provided with art materials.
- When children are working to express themselves and to represent the world around them, creativity

can be fostered by supporting their own ways to explore, to inquire, and to be active with their hands and bodies.

In many schools and centers for young children, in the United States as well as in other countries, I have seen the results of a good integration of learning and creativity; I have observed the sense of joy and self-esteem that children gain through this integrated experience. These feelings of joy and self-esteem reverberate throughout the environment and affect all people connected with the school.

Among the common elements present in these learning places are:

- a sense of security on the part of the children,
- an organization of space that allows for activity independent of the teacher,
- open-ended materials,
- active two-way communication between children and teacher,
- teachers who are at ease with children's unusual choices about how to deal with materials and equipment,
- and a pervasive sense of satisfaction in being there.

I would like to present what is happening in one particularly well-documented example, the program found in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Baji Rankin will illustrate how educators in Reggio Emilia

○ approach a specific project in her article, “Inviting Children’s Creativity” (see page 38).

Creativity in Reggio Emilia, Italy

Reggio Emilia is a town of 130,000 inhabitants located in the northern, highly developed part of the Italian peninsula. Their municipal early education program originated in schools started by parents at the end of World War II. The city now runs 22 pre-primary schools for children aged three to six, as well as 13 infant-toddler centers for children under the age of three. The program is virtually free for parents who have children in the older group, and it has a sliding scale fee based on income for parents of the younger group. Within this program, 47% and 35% of the two age groups, respectively, are served.

This early education school system is supported by the whole community. It has developed into the excellent program it is today through many years of strong commitment and cooperation among parents and educators. The entire community considers both education and care as necessary components of a high quality full-day program.

○ The convictions about creativity held by the educators in Reggio Emilia are connected to the basic principles that form their educational approach. Many of these principles are the same ones that inspire educators in the United States. So it is interesting to examine the direct application of these principles to 30 years of development in a city-wide early childhood system. How could one hope to find a wider- and longer-standing successful experiment?

Following are some of the principles and elements of organization that inform the work of the Reggio Emilia educators. I will point out how these principles support creativity and offer suggestions about applying them in other situations.

Integrating Creativity and Learning

○ Reggio educators believe children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, in engaging in social interaction, and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them. Creativity is seen not as an exceptional occurrence or a separate mental faculty, but as a characteristic way of thinking, knowing, and making choices.

By observing what children do, we can find the seeds of creative exploration that need to be nurtured. And by listening to children talk to one another, we can detect in their words the beginning thoughts that can lead, with support, to novel constructions.

Ensuring a Community of Well-Being

In order for children to learn, Reggio educators believe their well-being has to be guaranteed. Such well-being is connected to the well-being of parents and of teachers and to the relationships between and among all three groups: children, parents, and teachers. Relationships form the base for the exchange of ideas and support cognitive experiences, including unconventional exploration. In fact, creativity seems to express itself through a combination of cognitive, effective, and imaginative processes that can lead to unexpected solutions.

The participation of parents takes many forms: day-to-day interaction; work in the school; discussions of educational and psychological issues; and special events, excursions, and celebrations. The spirit of cooperation pervades all levels of relationships throughout the system. It is understood that expectations of teachers, schools, families, and the community — and the ways children perceive those expectations — can influence their disposition toward creativity.

Special activities, more intensely at the beginning, but throughout the school year, can be worked into normal planning to help establish and maintain relationships with each child, among children, with parents, and among colleagues, as well as to make the community aware about the life of its young children. Such activities will make daily work more meaningful and rewarding.

Creating a Supportive Environment

Layout of the space in the schools in Reggio Emilia favors encounters, communication, and relationships. The setup of structures, objects, and activities favors choices and discoveries in the process of learning. Children in this process reinvent their own ideas, change their points of view, and seem to love forms and meanings that transform themselves. This is part of creativity.

An assessment of space in terms of its implications for children’s social development and cooperation can add another dimension beyond the structuring of space to favor

Beginnings

Beginnings

a sense of belonging, trust, independence, and exploration. Children and teachers together find suggestions for carrying on activities and projects in a more meaningful and stimulating way, having at their disposal (safe) material that is not commonly found in schools (recycled or inexpensive) and in having a variety of it. To gather material and to use it in many combinations can be an ongoing project involving children and parents.

Respecting Individual Rhythms

Children's own timing and rhythms are considered in planning and carrying out activities and projects in Reggio Emilia. Projects and exploration of themes or materials can take from a few days to several months. Extended periods of uninterrupted time during the day are organized.

An established schedule needs to be a flexible tool to enable teachers to respond to children's real and present needs. For children to have time to explore something that intrigues them or to complete a construction or to stay with a particular question can lead to new and satisfying discoveries.

Understanding the Adult's Role

Teachers in Reggio are expected to listen to, observe, and understand children. They act as resources and provide occasions of discovery and learning for the children. In fact, they are partners in the children's process of learning; they enjoy discovering with them. The role of the teacher as observer and interpreter of actions and thoughts favors creativity.

Note especially the action and interaction of teachers with children in the dinosaur project, presented by Baji Rankin in her article on page 38.

Recording a History of Learning

An *atelierista*, a teacher trained in the visual arts, works in every pre-primary school in Reggio (and visits the infant-toddler centers). The *atelierista* operates a special space, a workshop or studio, called an *atelier* which is for the use of all of that school's children and teachers. The *atelier* contains a great variety of resource materials as well as records of past projects and experiences which are displayed on the walls and shelves. Archives hold more records.

One of the premises of creativity is that the process of knowing finds connections with the process of expressing what is known, using the endless resources that make up "the hundred languages of children," a slogan that Reggio educators use to stress the potential of children's expression.

Expression and representation are enhanced by appropriate time, space, and attention. The opportunity to return to a project that is available over time can enrich the experience; the ability to go over a problem after having taken some distance from it can help one find new solutions. A working space for this purpose will support the creative process.

Responding to the Moment

The curriculum is not set definitively in advance in Reggio Emilia. General goals are expressed; hypotheses are made by the teachers about the direction activities and projects can take and appropriate preparations are made. The curriculum emerges as an activity or project progresses. Children feel a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known, precisely because teachers are adventuring with them. There is no pre-set course organized by the adult. However, support from the teachers is essential to help children develop personal resources.

At times, curriculum planning places constraints both on the children and on the teachers. Teachers can learn to have more trust in themselves and in the potentials of the children. They can learn to feel less need for a pre-set structure and to adjust their course as they proceed — as they discover right along with the children.

Fostering Peer Support

Teachers in Reggio work in pairs in each classroom, maintain a strong collegial relationship with all other teachers and staff, and engage in continuous training and theoretical enrichment. They see themselves as researchers, preparing documentation of their work and integrating the creative process. They include products of the children in the documentation in the original form and/or in photographs or videos.

The ongoing role of the teacher as researcher can add greatly to the self-esteem and commitment of a teacher. Working together on collecting, preparing, and displaying documentation that pertains to the whole school can also

○ foster cooperation among teachers and improve communication with parents and the community.

Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the program in Reggio Emilia, offers this insight:

“Creativity? It is always difficult to notice when it is dressed in everyday clothing and has the ability to appear and disappear, suddenly. Nonetheless, our task, regarding creativity, is to help children to climb their own mountains, as high as possible.”

Lella Gandini is the author of children's books and books about children. She is also a correspondent for Bambini, an Italian early education magazine. Each year she does inservice training in Italy in cities like Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, and Trento. She is the liaison for the Reggio Emilia exhibit — “The Hundred Languages of Children” — as it tours the United States.

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