

Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins

by Loris Malaguzzi

These comments are translated and adapted from a seminar presented by Professor Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia, Italy, June 1993.

There are hundreds of different images of the child. Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image. For example, if your image is that boys and girls are very different from one another, you will behave differently in your interactions with each of them.

The environment you construct around you and the children also reflects this image you have about the child. There's a difference between the environment that you are able to build based on a preconceived image of the child and the environment that you can build that is based on the child you see in front of you — the relationship you build with the child, the games you play. An environment that grows out of your relationship with the child is unique and fluid. The quality and quantity of relationships among you as adults and educators also reflects your image of the child. Children are very sensitive and can see and sense very quickly the spirit of what is going on among the adults in their world. They understand whether the adults are working together in a truly collaborative way or if they are separated in some way from each other, living their experience as if it were private with little interaction.

Posing Important Questions

When you begin working with children in the morning, you must, as adults, pose questions about

the children, such as: "When are these children really going to begin socializing?" And at the same time the children will pose questions to the adults: "When are the adults really going to begin socializing?" This is a dialogue that needs to be continual between the adults and the children. The adults ask questions from the world of adults to the children. The children will ask questions to the adults. The expectations that the children have of the adults and the adults have of the children are important. We must spend some time talking about these expectations.

The family — mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents — is also involved in this questioning. Daily they need to ask: "What is this child doing in the school?"

It's very probable that once a day, maybe twice or three times or many times a day, the children are asking themselves: "What is my mother doing?" "What is my father doing?" "What is my brother or my sister doing?" "Are they having more fun than I am?" "Are they bored?"

The school we are talking about is not the school you are familiar with in the past, but it is something that you can hope for.

Considering Each Child's Reality

We can never think of the child in the abstract. When we think about a child, when we pull out a child to look at, that child is already tightly connected and linked to a certain reality of the world — she has relationships and experiences. We cannot separate this child from a particular reality. She brings these experiences, feelings, and relationships into school with her.

And it is the same for you as adults. When you enter the school in the morning, you carry with you pieces of your life — your happiness, your sadness, your hopes, your pleasures, the stresses from your life. You never come in an isolated way; you always come with pieces of the world attached to you. So the meetings that we have are always contaminated with the experiences that we bring with us.

Growing Comfortable with the Unknown

School is not at all like billiards. When you play billiards you push the ball with a certain force and it hits the table and bounces off; there's a definite way the ball will go, depending on force and direction. Children are not at all like this, predictable. But sometimes schools function as if they were; these are schools with no joy.

Of course, many things that happen in school can be seen ahead and planned beforehand. But many things that happen cannot be known ahead of time. Something will start to grow inside the child and suddenly what is happening in the school will move in that direction. Sometimes what happens starts inside the adults. School can never be always predictable. We need to be open to what takes place and able to change our plans and go with what might grow at that very moment both inside the child and inside ourselves.

Each one of us needs to be able to play with the things that are coming out of the world of children. Each one of us needs to have curiosity, and we need to be able to try something new based on the ideas that we collect from the children as they go along. Life has to be somewhat agitated and upset, a bit restless, somewhat unknown. As life flows with the thoughts of the children, we need to be open, we need to change our ideas; we need to be comfortable with the restless nature of life.

All of this changes the role of the teacher, a role that becomes much more difficult and complex. It also makes the world of the teacher more beautiful, something to become involved in.

Enjoying Relationships

The ability to enjoy relationships and work together is very important. Children need to enjoy being in school, they need to love their school and the interac-

tions that take place there. Their expectations of these interactions is critical.

It is also important for the teachers to enjoy being with the other teachers, to enjoy seeing the children stretch their capacities and use their intelligences, to enjoy interactions with the children. Both parts are essential.

Both children and adults need to feel active and important — to be rewarded by their own efforts, their own intelligences, their own activity and energy. When a child feels these things are valued, they become a fountain of strength for him. He feels the joy of working with adults who value his work and this is one of the bases for learning.

Overactivity on the part of the adult is a risk factor. The adult does too much because he cares about the child; but this creates a passive role for the child in her own learning.

Finding Our Way in the Forest

All of this is a great forest. Inside the forest is the child. The forest is beautiful, fascinating, green, and full of hopes; there are no paths. Although it isn't easy, we have to make our own paths, as teachers and children and families, in the forest. Sometimes we find ourselves together within the forest, sometimes we may get lost from each other, sometimes we'll greet each other from far away across the forest; but it's living together in this forest that is important. And this living together is not easy.

We have to find each other in the forest and begin to discuss what the education of the child actually means. The important aspect is not just to promote the education of the child but the health and happiness of the child as well.

We need to think of the school as a living organism. Children have to feel that the world is inside the school and moves and thinks and works and reflects on everything that goes on. Of course not all children are the same — each child brings a part of something that's different into the school.

Learning to Wait

All of this pushes us to produce a higher level of observation. We must move beyond just looking at the child to become better observers, able to penetrate

into the child to understand each child's resources and potential and present state of mind. We need to compare these with our own in order to work well together.

Our task is to construct educational situations that we propose to the children in the morning. It's okay to improvise sometimes but we need to plan the project. It may be a project that is projected over a period of days, or weeks, or even months. We need to produce situations in which children learn by themselves, in which children can take advantage of their own knowledge and resources autonomously, and in which we guarantee the intervention of the adult as little as possible. We don't want to teach children something that they can learn by themselves. We don't want to give them thoughts that they can come up with by themselves. What we want to do is activate within children the desire and will and great pleasure that comes from being the authors of their own learning.

We need to know how to recognize a new presence, how to wait for the child. This is something that is learned, it's not automatic. We often have to do it against our own rush to work in our own way. We'll discover that our presence, which has to be visible and warm, makes it possible for us to try to get inside the child and what that child is doing. And this may seem to be passive, but it is really a very strong activity on our part.

Becoming Totally Involved

It's a constant value for the children to know that the adult is there, attentive and helpful, a guide for the child. Perhaps this way of working with the child will build a different understanding of our role than we have had before. Clarifying the meaning of our presence and our being with children is something that is vital for the child. When the child sees that the adult is there, totally involved with the child, the child doesn't forget. This is something that's right for us and it's right for the children.

There are many things that are part of a child's life just as they are part of an adult's life. The desire to do something for someone, for instance. Every adult has a need to feel that we are seen/observed by others. (Observing others is also important.) This is just as true for children as for adults. Therefore, it's possible to observe, to receive a lot of pleasure and satisfaction from observing in many different ways.

When the child is observed, the child is happy — it's almost an honor that he is observed by an adult. On the other hand, a good teacher who knows how to observe feels good about himself because that person knows that he is able to take something from the situation, transform it, and understand it in a new way.

What the child doesn't want is an observation from the adult who isn't really there, who is distracted. The child wants to know that she is observed, carefully, with full attention. The child wants to be observed in action. She wants the teacher to see the process of her work, rather than the product. The teacher asks the child to take a bucket of water from one place to the other. It's not important to the child that the teacher only sees him arrive with the bucket of water at the end. What is important to the child is that the teacher sees the child while the child is working, while the child is putting out the effort to accomplish the task — the processes are important, how much the child is putting into the effort, how heroic the child is doing this work. What children want is to be observed while engaged, they do not want the focus of the observation to be on the final product. When we as adults are able to see the children in the process, it's as if we are opening a window and getting a fresh view of things.

"If only you had seen all I had to do." The child wants this observation. We all want this. This means that when you learn to observe the child, when you have assimilated all that it means to observe the child, you learn many things that are not in books — educational or psychological. And when you have done this you will learn to have more diffidence and more distrust of rapid assessments, tests, judgments. The child wants to be observed, but she doesn't want to be judged. Even when we do judge, things escape us, we do not see things, so we are not able to evaluate in a wide way. This system of observing children carries you into many different feelings and thoughts, into a kind of teaching full of uncertainty and doubt, and it takes wisdom and a great deal of knowledge on the part of the teachers to be able to work within this situation of uncertainty.

Discovering a New Way of Observing

Observing in this way offers tremendous benefits. It requires a shift in the role of the teacher from an emphasis of teaching to an emphasis on learning, teachers learning about themselves as teachers as well as teachers learning about children. This is a

self-learning that takes place for the teacher and it enables the teacher to see things that are taking place in children that teachers were not able to see before.

We have to let children be with children. Children learn a lot from other children, and adults learn from children being with children. Children love to learn among themselves, and they learn things that it would never be possible to learn from interactions with an adult. The interaction between children is a very fertile and a very rich relationship. If it is left to ferment without adult interference and without that excessive assistance that we sometimes give, then it's more advantageous to the child. We don't want to protect something that doesn't need to be protected.

It's important for the teacher who works with young children to understand that she knows little about children. Teachers need to learn to see the children, to listen to them, to know when they are feeling some distance from us as adults and from children, when they are distracted, when they are surrounded by a shadow of happiness and pleasure, and when they are surrounded by a shadow of sadness and suffering. We have to understand that they are moving and working with many ideas, but their most important task is to build relationships with friends. They are trying to understand what friendship is. Children grow in many directions together, but a child is always in search of relationships. Children get to know each other through all their senses. Touching the hair of another child is very important. Smell is important. This is a way children are able to understand the identity of themselves and the identity of others.

Redefining Roles

We need to define the role of the adult, not as a transmitter but as a creator of relationships — relationships not only between people but also between things, between thoughts, with the environment. It's like we need to create a typical New York City traffic jam in the school.

We teachers must see ourselves as researchers, able to think, and to produce a true curriculum, a curriculum produced from all of the children.

What we so often do is impose adult time on children's time and this negates children being able to work with their own resources.

When we in Reggio say children have 100 languages, we mean more than the 100 languages of children, we also mean the 100 languages of adults, of teachers. The teacher must have the capacity for many different roles. The teacher has to be the author of a play, someone who thinks ahead of time. Teachers also need to be the main actors in the play, the protagonists. The teacher must forget all the lines he knew before and invent the ones he doesn't remember. Teachers also have to take the role of the prompter, the one who gives the cues to the actors. Teachers need to be set designers who create the environment in which activities take place. At the same time, the teacher needs to be the audience who applauds.

The teacher has many different roles and she needs to be in many places and do many different things and use many languages. Sometimes the teacher will find himself without words, without anything to say; and at times this is fortunate for the child, because then the teacher will have to invent new words.

Forging Alliances with Families

We must forge strong alliances with the families of our children. Imagine the school as an enormous hot air balloon. The hot air balloon is on the ground when the parents bring their children in the morning. Some parents think the balloon is going to rise up and fly around during the day. Others would really prefer that the balloon remain on the ground because that way they are sure their children are safe and protected. But the children want to go up and fly and travel everywhere in a hot air balloon, to see in this different way, to look at things from above. Our problem is that to make the hot air balloon fly we have to make sure that parents understand the importance of what the teachers and children are doing in the hot air balloon. Flying through the air, seeing the world in a different way, adds to the wealth of all of us, particularly the children.

We need to make a big impression on parents, amaze them, convince them that what we are doing is something extremely important for their children and for them, that we are producing and working with children to understand their intelligence and their intelligences. This means that we have to become skilled in flying and managing this hot air balloon. Perhaps it was our previous lack of skill that made us fall. We all need to learn to be better hot air balloon pilots.

Building Strong Images

What we have to do now is draw out the image of the child, draw the child out of the desperate situations that many children find themselves in. If we redeem the child from these difficult situations, we redeem ourselves.

Children have a right to a good school — a good building, good teachers, right time, good activities. This is the right of ALL children.

It is necessary to give an immediate response to a child. Children need to know that we are their friends, that they can depend on us for the things they desire, that we can support them in the things that they have, but also in the things that they dream about, that they desire.

Children have the right to imagine. We need to give them full rights of citizenship in life and in society.

It's necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold.

Those who have the image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don't need that as an image of children.

Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and of their strengths.

Translated by Baji Rankin, Leslie Morrow, and Lella Gandini.

Loris Malaguzzi

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Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, began teaching in schools started by parents just after the end of WWII. Through the years, he transformed that courageous initiative into the internationally acclaimed program for young children that we know today.

Those who worked with Malaguzzi or heard him speak have vivid memories of an intense learning experience — his philosophical reflections, surprising observations, challenges of conventional thoughts in education, unexpected turns of thought, complexity of ideas, and delightful metaphors. One way to pay tribute to Loris Malaguzzi is to listen to his words:

“Our goal is to build an amiable school, where children, teachers and families feel at home. Such a school requires careful thinking and planning concerning procedures, motivations and interests. It must embody ways of getting along together, of intensifying relationships.”

Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (editors),
The Hundred Languages of Children (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1993).