

Crossing Boundaries

Ideas and experiences in dialogue for a new culture of education of children and adults

A Conversation with Amelia Gambetti by Bonnie Neugebauer
following the international conference held in Reggio Emilia, Italy, February 25-28, 2004

It was fantastic to be in Reggio Emilia for this important international conference to celebrate the beginning of Reggio Children and the life and work of Loris Malaguzzi. So many countries were represented!

Amelia: I think the message of the program, Crossing Boundaries, was also visible in the presence of people from 54 countries around the world along with people from Italy and Reggio Emilia. These 1,400 attendees feel that we are together in a common effort within our very different contexts — we are all invested in changing things in the field of education. All of us are advocates for children.

Why do you think so many people want to learn about your work?

Every time people come to Reggio, they want to understand our approach to working with children and families within our communities. They understand that our experience cannot be replicated, but maybe they have found value within our work for what they are thinking about in their own communities.

They also have the possibility to encounter Reggio Emilia through reading our books. How we explain how we as adults, as educators, have been listening to children and to ourselves and how we build experiences and connections between the processes of learning and the processes of building knowledge impacts them, because I think all this shows the power of thinking.

This seems to be such an important way of understanding your message — the focus on the power of thinking.

Our approach to our work as educators and the way in which we become partners in our work with young children is grounded in this deep respect for thinking. The books tell the story in process and analyze projects done with the children.

What other ways is your work shared around the world?

The exhibit was and is another channel of communication and information about our experience, and it is also a tool for professional development. The exhibit and books talk about our work as educators through our work with the children and parents. We also try to give visibility to learning strategies.

Then people have and build the desire to come to Reggio Emilia, and when they go back they talk about what they see. This word of mouth has, of course, increased interest and curiosities. People read and encounter the experience and what becomes visible to them is also the aspect of giving value to our work and our life. All of these people, these educators, begin to understand that our philosophy is based on values, for example the value of giving strength to the image of a competent child, the value of participating in the life of the school, the value of listening to each other and the context where we live, the value of

giving identities to our environment, the value of collaborating together and organizing our work . . . I think that these values build a new respect for human beings, and consequently for young children.

Unfortunately in the world, young children are not so easily considered. Usually the intention is more to protect them, to defend them, fill them with information to prepare them for life and to guide their process of learning, without giving children credit for their own thinking. By observing these aspects and thinking about our encounters, our work in Reggio Emilia can become a new resource for understanding that investment in young children and giving credibility to their own thinking can even change the way in which society develops.

Values of respect and dignity for life are concepts that we all can have in common no matter where we live. Curiosity about this brings people to us. They come to listen to our experiences to see if our experiences can then be bridged to theirs.

The power of thinking, respect for life, changing societies — these are big ideas.

We know we are fighting against something bigger than us, but we try. We invest in our work, because we feel committed about it and we feel we have to take responsibility about what we do. When other educators

come to Reggio, we feel the importance and the pleasure of being together so that we do not feel isolated. Maybe the Reggio experience of 40 years can be a message of hope. If you try, if you don't give up, if as citizens you can even get your municipality to support you, then something can be done. We can hope for a better future for life.

But we need each other. I'm very proud because I think Reggio Emilia with its experiences can offer a context for all of us to feel we are together with an openness to do something and a willingness to do something.

You seem to be thinking beyond an educational perspective . . .

Education is not isolated from the fields of economy or philosophy, architecture or art, or administration or psychology or research. All work can be grounded in an analysis of relationships, research to make choices, and

observations. It's an attitude in thinking that can be connected to any field. We need to build more bridges with other fields of knowledge to extend our own style of thinking and our work as educators.

What will the future hold for the schools in Reggio Emilia?

Our roots, where we are from, and our history, who we are, the present and the past, help us evolve into the future. It's a continual process. When people come to Reggio many times they see this evolution. We keep searching for something, something more or different. Situations evolve, we evolve, why shouldn't our style of working with children evolve too? Strong collaborations with colleagues enable us to share the responsibilities, the challenges, the problems — but also the joys and pleasure of learning. Learning should be full of joy; there should be a fire inside so we don't get bored. This is a major

concern, to fight against routine. Maybe it's safer to do what has always been done, but it takes away from the enthusiasm of learning, even through risking and making mistakes. Life is also about making mistakes and learning through them. Each of us must build inside ourselves an attitude about being a researcher, about being always open to new encounters.

We are delighted that Barnabas Otaala from Namibia and Agatha Thapa from Nepal, both valued members of the community of the World Forum on Early Care and Education, were invited to make presentations during this international conference. The World Forum Commitment Bowl passed to you, Amelia, as World Forum International Organizing Committee Member, and then to Barnabas Otaala to begin a journey around the world that will bring it to Montreal in 2005. It was an incredible experience to see the work of the World Forum active within this conference in Reggio Emilia. Thank you for creating this opportunity.