

# History & Development of the Reggio preschools

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*Interview with Malaguzzi by Lella Gandini (extracts)*

The history of our approach, and my place in it, starts six days after the end of the Second World War. It is the spring of 1945.

## 1945 - Community Determination

Destiny must have wanted me to be part of an extraordinary event. I hear that in a small village called Villa Cella, a few miles from the town of Reggio Emilia, people decided to build and run a school for young children. That idea seems incredible to me. I rush there on my bike and I discover that it is all quite true. I find women intent upon salvaging and washing pieces of brick. The people had gotten together and had decided that the money to begin the construction would come from the sale of an abandoned war tank, a few trucks, and some horses left behind by the retreating Germans.

"The rest will come", they say to me.

"I am a teacher," I say.

Good, they say, "If that is true, come work with us."

It all seemed unbelievable: the idea, the school, the inventory consisting of a tank, a few trucks, and horses. They explain everything to me: "We will build the school on our own, working at night and on Sundays. The land has been donated by a farmer; the bricks and beams will be salvaged from bombed houses; the sand will come from the river; the work will be volunteered by all of us."

"And the money to run the school?"

A moment of embarrassment and then they say, "We will find it". Women, men, young people—all farmers and workers, all special people who had survived a hundred war horrors—are dead serious.

## Setting Down Roots; Seven more parent-run schools

Within eight months the school and our friendship had set down roots. What happened at Villa Cella was but the first spark.. Other schools were opened on the outskirts and in the poorest sections of town, all created and run by parents. Finding support for the school, in a devastated town, rich only in mourning and poverty, would be a long and difficult ordeal, and would require sacrifices and solidarity now unthinkable. When seven more were added in the poor areas surrounding the city to the "school of the tank" at Villa Cella, started by women with the help of the National Liberation Committee (CLN), we understood that the phenomenon was irreversible. Some of the schools would not survive. Most of them, however, would display enough rage and strength to survive for almost 20 years.

Finally, after seven years of teaching in a middle school, I decided to leave my job. The work with the children had been rewarding, but the state-run school continued to pursue its own course, sticking to its stupid and intolerable indifference towards children, its opportunistic and obsequious attention towards authority, and its self-serving cleverness, pushing prepackaged knowledge. I went to Rome to study psychology at the National Center for Research (CNR).

When I returned to Reggio Emilia I started, for the municipality, a town-sponsored mental health center for children with difficulties in school. At this time I began living two parallel lives, one in the morning at the centre and the other in the afternoon and evening in the small, parent-run schools.

## The Learning Process - breaking traditional patterns

The teachers in these small schools had exceptionally high motivation. They were very different from one another for they had been trained in various Catholic or other private schools, but their thoughts were ample and greedy, and their energy boundless.

I joined up with these teachers and started to work with the children, teaching them as we ourselves were learning. Soon we became aware that many of them were in poor health and undernourished. We also learned how alien the standard Italian language was to them, as their families had for generations spoken a local dialect



We asked the parents to help us, but finding ways for all of us to cooperate effectively turned out to be a most demanding task - not for a lack of determination but rather a lack of experience we were breaking traditional patterns.

When we started to work with these courageous parents, we felt both enthusiasm and fear. We knew perfectly well how weak and unprepared we were. We took stock of our resources—not a difficult task. More difficult was the task of increasing those resources. And even more difficult was to predict how we would use them with the children. We were able to imagine the great challenge, but we did not yet know our own capabilities nor those of the children. We informed the mothers that we, just as the children, had much to learn.

A simple, liberating thought came to our aid, namely that things about children and for children are only learned from children. We knew how this was true and at the same time not true. But we needed that assertion and guiding principle; it gave us strength and turned out to be an essential part of our collective wisdom. It was a preparation for 1963, the year in which the first municipal schools came to life.

### 1963: The First City-run school for young children

(The first city-run school had) two classrooms, large enough for 60 children, and we gave it the name of Robinson to recall the adventures of Defoe's hero. You will have heard how the birth of the first school in 1963 established an important landmark. For the first time in Italy, the people affirmed the right to establish a secular school for young children. It was a necessary change in a society that was renewing itself, changing deeply, and in which citizens and families were increasingly asking for social services and schools for their children. They wanted schools of a new kind: of better quality, free from charitable tendencies, not merely custodial, and not discriminatory in any way.

It was a decisive achievement, although the school was housed in a small wooden building assigned to us by the authorities. Indeed, it was difficult to find enough children to participate because of the novelty of a city-run school. Three years later, one evening it burned down. We all ran there, even the mayor, and there we stood watching until only ashes remained. Yet, one year later, the school was rebuilt in brick and concrete.

### Education in full public view

We were now involved in a serious endeavour. From these early roots of civic determination and passion, widening to become part of the public consciousness, are the happenings and stories that I am now narrating to you.

We received the first expert group of teachers from the parent-run schools. Responsibilities were clear in our minds; many eyes, not all friendly, were watching us. We had to make as few errors as possible; we had to find our cultural identity quickly, make ourselves known, and win trust and respect. I remember that, after a few months, the need to make ourselves known became so strong that we planned a most successful activity. Once a week we would transport the school to town. Literally, we would pack ourselves, the children, and our tools into a truck and we would teach school and show exhibits in the open air, in public parks or under the colonnade of the municipal theatre. The children were happy. The people saw; they were surprised and they asked questions.

### Central Principles

We knew that the new situation required continuity but also many breaks with the past. The experiences of the past we sought to preserve were the human warmth and reciprocal help, the sense of doing a job that revealed through the children and their families— unknown motivation and resources, and an awareness of the values of each project and each choice for use in putting together entirely different activities.

We wanted to recognize the right of each child to be a protagonist and the need to sustain each child's spontaneous curiosity at a high level. We had to preserve our decision to learn from children, from events, and from families to the full extent of our professional limits, and to maintain a readiness to change points of view so as never to have too many certainties.



Three-year old exploring with Giovanni Piazza, atelierista at Viletta School

## New projects and ideas

It was a feverish time, a time of adaptation, of continuous adjustment of ideas, of selection of projects, and of attempts. Those projects and attempts were expected to produce a great deal and to do well; they were supposed to respond to the combined expectations of children and families and to reflect our competencies which were still in the making. I remember that we really got involved in a project based on Robinson Crusoe. The plan was for all of us together, including the children, to reconstruct the story, the character, and the adventures of our hero. We worked on reading and retelling the story; we used our memory as well as our skills at drawing, painting, clay, and woodworking. We rebuilt the ship, the sea, the island, the cave, and the tools. It was a long and spectacular reconstruction.

## Incorporating ideas, developing pedagogy

The following year, experts by now, we went on to work on a similar reconstruction of the story of Pinocchio. Then a few years later we changed gears. I had been at the Rousseau Institute and at the Ecole des Petits (School for Young Children) of Piaget in Geneva. Because we were inspired by Piaget, we opted to work with numbers, mathematics, and perception.

We were then, and still are, convinced that it is not an imposition on children or an artificial exercise to work with numbers, quantity, classification, dimensions, forms, measurement, transformation, orientation, conservation and change, or speed and space, because these explorations belong spontaneously to the everyday experiences of living, playing, negotiating, thinking, and speaking by children. This was an absolutely new challenge in Italy, and our initiative rewarded us. It marked the beginning of an experimental phase that gained breadth from examining different psychological theories and looking at different theoretical sources and research coming from outside our country. But in reflecting on that experience, a time during which we were proceeding without clear points of reference, we should also recall our excesses, the incongruity of our expectations, and the weaknesses of our critical and self-critical processes.

## Wider cultural changes require new ideas and changes in the preschools

We were aware that many things in the city, in the country, in politics, in customs, and in terms of needs and expectations were changing. In 1954 the Italian public had started watching television. Migrations from the South to the North began, with the consequent abandonment of the countryside. With new work possibilities, women were developing aspirations and demands that were breaking with tradition. The baby boom modified everything, particularly the role and the aims of schools for young children, and led to a powerful growing demand for social services.

Furthermore, the request to place young sons and daughters in preschools was developing into a mass phenomenon.

From all this emerged the need to produce new ideas and to experiment with new educational strategies, in part because the municipal government was increasingly determined to institute more schools to satisfy the emerging needs of children and families. Women's groups, teachers, parents, citizens' councils, and school committees were starting to work with the municipality to support and contribute to that development.

After much pressure and battles by the people, in 1967 all the parent-run schools came under the administration of the municipality of Reggio Emilia.

**Lella Gandini:** *What are your feelings, and how do you view your experiences when you recall the history of your programme?*

Dear Lella, you have to agree that seeing an army tank, six horses, and three trucks generating a school for young children is extraordinary. The fact that the school still exists and continues to function well is the minimum that one could expect from such beginnings. Furthermore, its valuable history confirms that a new educational experience can emerge from the least expected circumstances. If we continue to review those extraordinary origins, it is because we are still trying to understand the intuitions, the ideas, and the feelings that were there at the start and that



A foreign delegation visiting the Diana School

have accompanied it ever since. These correspond to what John Dewey called, "the foundation of the mind," or Lev Vygotsky considered, "the loan of consciousness". Such concepts we have always kept in mind, especially in moments when we have had to make difficult decisions or overcome obstacles.

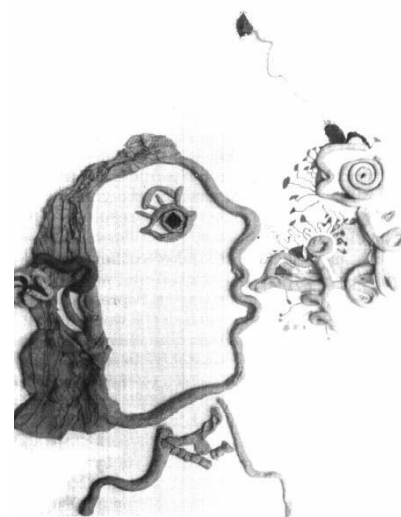
Indeed, the first philosophy learned from these extraordinary events, in the wake of such a war, was to give a human, dignified, *civil* meaning to existence, to be able to make choices with clarity of mind and purpose, and to yearn for the future of mankind.

But the same events granted us something else right away, to which we have always tried to remain faithful. This something came out of requests made by mothers and fathers, whose lives and concerns were focused upon their children. They asked for nothing less than that this school, which they had built with their own hands, be a different kind of school, a school that could educate their children in a different way from before. It was the women especially who expressed this desire. The equation was simple: If the children had legitimate rights, then they also should have opportunities to develop their intelligence and to be made ready for the success that would not, and should not, escape them.

These were the parents' thoughts, expressing a universal aspiration, a declaration against the betrayal of children's potential, and a warning that children first of all had to be taken seriously and believed in. These three concepts could have fitted perfectly in any good book on education.

And they suited us just fine.

The ideas coming from parents were shared by others who understood their deep implications. And if our endeavour has endured for many years, it has been because of this collective wisdom.



Little girl telling a story

This excerpt is from 'The Hundred Languages of Children', ed. Edwards, Gandini, Forman.



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