

## Chapter 9

# Teacher and Learner, Partner and Guide: The Role of the Teacher

Carolyn Edwards

[O]ur image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them only engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical, and does not consider with ambivalence the role of the affective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all, connected to adults and other children. (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10)

[W]e need a teacher who is sometimes the director, sometimes the set designer, sometimes the curtain and the backdrop, and sometimes the prompter. A teacher who is both sweet and stern, who is the electrician, who dispenses the paints, and who is even the audience—the audience who watches, sometimes claps, sometimes remains silent, full of emotion, who sometimes judges with skepticism, and at other times applauds with enthusiasm. (Loris Malaguzzi, quoted in Rinaldi, 2006, p. 89)

It is not easy to give a complete outline of the teacher’s task,” Loris Malaguzzi once said (1995, p. 18). In fact, the role of the teacher in Reggio Emilia is complex, multifaceted, and necessarily fluid, responsive to the changing times and needs of children, families, and society.

Yet teaching and learning are at the heart of it and therefore provide a good place to begin. In Reggio Emilia, the teacher’s role in assisting learning is a subject of central and abiding interest and concern. Over the past 50 years, teachers and administrators have discussed and considered the responsibilities, goals, difficulties, and opportunities faced by the teachers in their public child-care system. They have evolved together a shared discourse, a coherent way of thinking and talking about the role of the teacher inside and outside the classroom, based—as are all aspects of their organization, environmental design, pedagogy, and curriculum—on an explicit philosophy about the nature of children as learners—young human beings who are learning and developing in reciprocity with peers, close adults, and their community—as well as about their educational values, focused on the search for truth and beauty in everyday life (see Part IV, this volume). This language of education serves to organize and bring together all of the participants in the Reggio system into one community. This chapter describes perspectives on the role of the teacher, drawing on recorded observations that illustrate teacher and child behavior, on examples from published sources, and “The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit. The teachers’ and children’s words convey the distinctive meanings and ways of packaging ideas and communicating with others that are encountered in Reggio Emilia.

## DEFINITIONS OF THE TEACHER’S ROLE IN REGGIO EMILIA

What is the role of the teacher in the early childhood classroom? When answering this question, a good place to begin is to analyze and list the various important dimensions as they are usually laid out in early childhood texts for North American classrooms. The roles typically include the following:

- Planning the curriculum to promote children’s development in all domains
- Planning the overall program and preparing the environment
- Interacting with children to promote learning through play and appropriate instruction
- Providing nurturance and guidance to children
- Observing children and assessing their progress
- Educating parents and encouraging family involvement
- Engaging in advocacy to communicate the value of early education to outside audiences

These same aspects are seen in the work of teachers in Reggio Emilia, although they gain new nuances of meaning seen through their distinctive ways of talking

about teaching. To quote Susan Fraser and Carol Gestwicki (2000, pp. 51–53), we can see that in the following:

- The role of teacher as curriculum planner changes to the role of the teacher as a *co-constructor of knowledge*.
- The role of the teacher as program planner emphasizes the role of *creator of the environment as a third teacher*.
- The role of the teacher in facilitating play changes to the role of the teacher as an *exchanger of understandings*.
- The role of providing guidance changes to the role of the teacher as a *supporter of the competent child*.
- The role of the teacher as an observer is extended to *documenter and researcher*.
- The role of the teacher as parent educator changes to the role of the teacher as a *partner with parents*.
- The role of communicator with outside audiences changes to the role of the teacher as *listener, provocateur, and negotiator of meaning*.

It seems clear that professional early childhood teachers, no matter their setting or society, agree on their basic range of responsibilities. Yet they do not think alike about these responsibilities: how they prioritize them, turn them into concrete tasks, and talk about the reasons for what they do. When asked to define the role of the teacher, for example, Reggio educators do not begin in the way typical to



The pair of teachers meeting with the *atelierista* at Diana Preschool.

North Americans, with a list of dimensions. Instead, they begin holistically and often speak of an idealized image—or rather, an idealized pair of images: teacher and child. The role of the adult as teacher complements the role of the child as learner; as Malaguzzi stated, “Your image of the child: Where teaching begins” (1994, p. 52). By creating shared meaning of the schoolchild’s nature, rights, and capacities, members of a community also can come to agree on what kind of teacher is needed to educate and provide for this child.

### Images of the Child and the Teacher

How to define this learning child? The educators in Reggio Emilia often say that young children are powerful, active, competent *protagonists* of their own growth. Children are protagonists in society, bearing the right to be listened to and to participate, to be part of the group and take action alongside others on the basis of their own particular experiences and level of consciousness. Children should never be thought about in an abstract, generalized way, disconnected from a concrete reality. Each unique child is tightly connected and linked to conditions in time and space. All children seek to realize their identity and make their voice heard within that specific context. Their particular context is the source of their individuality; through it, they express themselves using dialogue and interaction in the group and call on adults nearby to serve as partners, resources, and guides.

This intrinsically social view of children—as protagonists with unique personal, historical, and cultural identities—involves parallel expectations and possibilities for adults. Teachers are likewise protagonists—participants with children and parents in singular moments of time and history.

The definition of the teacher’s professional identity is thus not viewed in abstract terms, but in contexts, in relation to her colleagues, to the parents, and above all, to the children; but also in relation to her own identity and her personal and educational background and experience. (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 41)

Thus, any definitions of the teacher’s role can never be accepted once and for all, but instead constantly undergoes revision—as circumstances, parents, and children change; the dynamics of their concerns and exchanges shift; and as more comes to be understood about the fundamental processes of teaching and learning. Questions about what teachers can and should do can never be finally answered but rather must keep returning to the starting problem: What kind of teachers are needed by *our* children—those real individuals in the classrooms of today?

### Listening to Children

Carlina Rinaldi puts the act of “listening” at the heart of education (see Chapter 13, this volume). Thus, the teacher must not merely think about children as strong

and competent but must act in such a way as to persuade children that they deeply share this image. “Listening” means being fully attentive to the children and, at the same time, taking responsibility for recording and documenting what is observed and then using it as a basis for decision making shared with children and parents. “Listening” means seeking to follow and enter into the active learning taking place. Tiziana Filippini, *pedagogista*, described this in one of her first U.S. lectures:

Sometimes the adult works right inside a group of children and sometimes works just around the group, so he has many roles. The role of the adult is above all one of listening, observing, and understanding the strategy that children use in a learning situation. The teacher has, for us, a role as *dispenser of occasions*; and it is very important for us that the child should feel the teacher to be, not a judge, but a resource to whom he can go when he needs to borrow a gesture, a word. According to Vygotsky, if the child has gone from point **a** to point **b** and is getting very close to **c**, sometimes to reach **c**, he needs to borrow assistance from the adult at that very special moment. We feel that the teacher must be involved within the child’s exploring procedure, if the teacher wants to understand how to be the organizer and provoker of occasions, on the one hand, and co-actor in discoveries, on the other. And our expectations of the child must be very flexible and varied. We must be able to be amazed and to enjoy, like the children often do. We must be able to catch the ball that the children throw us, and toss it back to them in a way that makes the children want to continue the game with us, developing, perhaps, other games as we go along. (Filippini, 1990)

Thus, the teacher needs to enter into a kind of intellectual dialogue with the group of children and join in their excitement and curiosity. Although learning is a serious matter, the teacher must approach it in a spirit of playfulness as well as respect. The metaphor of “catching the ball that the children throw us, and then tossing it back to continue the game” is a favorite one in Reggio Emilia. Thinking of teacher–child interaction as a badminton game was originally suggested to Malaguzzi by the Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer.<sup>1</sup> Malaguzzi talked about how, “for the game to continue, the skills of the adult and child need appropriate adjustments to allow the growth through learning of the skills of the child” (Chapter 2, this volume).

One example of this responsive teaching is documented in a little booklet from the Diana Preschool called “The Sun Is the Earth’s Friend” (1998). Along with the 3-year-olds’ drawings and quotations, the booklet includes the teachers’ questions. From day to day, the teachers raised new questions for the children to wonder about, and these questions seemed to respond to the anthropomorphic thinking of very young age, and also to their interests about other beings. For instance, the children explored ideas about where is the sun, what it does, and how it stays up in the sky. They considered whether the sun has friends, and who are these friends. They compared the sun and the moon, and they considered where the sun goes at night and when it rains, and whether children can touch it, or live on it. In talking about what happens to the sun when it’s dark outside, children said:



A teacher stays near but just outside a group of children, to document without directly leading their work.

“It goes night-night.”

“It disappears.”

“It goes in its house, but it’s yellow and far away.”

“At night it goes on the earth, inside the earth, inside the sea, and the stars come out and then in the day the stars go in the sea.”

“At night, there’s the moon.”

Yet another version of responsive teaching involves providing a next occasion for the children to follow their conjectures or probing children’s drawing of how something works to help them clarify their theories. All of these supportive adult interventions are based on keying into the rhythm of the game and modeling an attitude of attention and care. The teacher seeks to extend the children’s intellectual stamina and attention span; increase their range of investigation strategies; enhance their concentration and effort; and still allow them to fully experience pleasure and joy in the game.

## SPIRALING LEARNING AND SHARED CONTROL

Thus, the teacher’s role centers on provoking occasions of discovery through a kind of alert, inspired listening and stimulation of children’s dialogue, co-action,

and co-construction of knowledge. As in North America, such optimal teaching is understood to be a complex, delicate, multifaceted task, involving many levels and calling for much expertise and continuous self-examination.

Carlina Rinaldi has provided important insights on the educator's role. In many discussions, she has highlighted how a teacher's work should be grounded in political beliefs and advocacy. This perspective is rooted in Rinaldi's political philosophy, a leftist progressivism and idealism common among people in her city and region of Italy. Rinaldi is proud of the ancient heritage of her region—rooted in an agrarian culture and tradition of large cooperating farm households—of relying on communal rather than individualistic enterprise (e.g., see Hellman, 1987; Putnam, 1993). She believes that citizens have a moral obligation to invest public resources in children's welfare and to enter into continuous and permanent knowledge creation with children for her city, and society in general, to progress and improve human well-being. She also believes that the teacher's role must be imagined in terms that are holistic and circular, not segmented and linear. Such a circularity—or better, *spiraling*—is seen in the revisiting that is a frequent component of the learning process. Teachers' actions are not expected to take place in a set order, or one time only, but instead to repeat in cycles of revisiting and re-representation.

From this standpoint, the teacher appraises and assesses what is happening with children within a cycle of days taking place within larger cycles (weeks, months, or even years). Such a spiraling, rather than linear, way of thinking and proceeding is characteristic of Reggio educators—whether they are describing the course of child learning and development; narrating the story of a particular curriculum project; winding through theoretical points that illuminate an aspect of practice; or, as here, thinking about pedagogical roles.

Reggio educators believe in shared control between teachers and children. For example, the teacher leads the learning of a group of children by searching for individuals' ideas to use to frame group action. Sometimes this involves leading group meetings and seeking to strike a “spark” by writing down what the children say, then reading back their comments, searching with them for insights that will motivate further questions and group activity. At other times, it involves the teacher sitting and listening, noticing provocative or insightful comments, then repeating or clarifying them to help the children sustain their talk or activity. Malaguzzi often stressed the importance of tuning in to exactly what children say (verbally or nonverbally) so that the teacher can pick up an idea and return it to the group, and thereby make their discussion and action more significant. This is vital when children seem unable to proceed. Their work may have lost all momentum, or their interest to dissipate. The teacher can help the children uncover their own insights or questions, perhaps expressed by one child in a tentative or partial way—not fully clear to themselves or the group as a whole. The teacher, noticing and appreciating the idea's potential to restimulate the whole group, steps in to restate the idea in clearer and more emphatic language, and thus makes the insight operative for the children, a kind of intellectual spark for further talk and action:

In this way the play of participation and the play of communication really take place. Of course, communication may take place without your assistance, but it would be important not to miss such a situation. (Vea Vecchi, group discussion, June 15, 1990, Diana Preschool)

At yet other times, especially at the end of a morning's activity, the teacher's intervention is needed to help the children search for an idea—especially one that emerges from an intellectual discussion or dispute between children—and shaping it into a hypothesis that should be tested, an empirical comparison that should be made, or a representation that should be attempted, as the basis for another day's activity by the group. Examining the question, hypothesis, or argument of one child thus becomes part of an ongoing process of raising and answering questions for all. With the help of the teacher, the question or observation of one child leads others to explore territory never encountered, perhaps never even suspected. This is genuine co-action of children.

As a project gets underway, teachers reflect, explore, study, research, and plan together possible ways to elaborate and extend the theme using materials, activities, visits, tools, and other resources. These ideas are then taken back to the classroom and investigated. The teachers work in co-teaching pairs in each classroom. The co-teaching organization is considered difficult, because the two adults must co-adapt and accommodate constantly, but nevertheless, it is powerful because it requires each adult to become used to peer collaboration, acquire a value for the social nature of intellectual growth, and become more able to help children (and parents) as they undertake joint learning and decision making.

Teachers communicate with parents about the current theme and encourage them to become involved in the activities of their child by finding necessary materials, working with teachers on the physical environment, offering supplementary books, and so on. In this way, parents are provoked to revise their image of their child and understand childhood in a richer and more complex way.

The teaching team works closely with other adults (at times the *atelierista*, at times the *pedagogista*) to plan and document what has transpired. This happens in different ways in different schools, but in general, documentation involves handwritten notes as well as backup audio-recordings and transcriptions of children's dialogue and group discussions; print and slide photographs or videotapes of key moments and activities; and collection of products and constructions made by children.

Throughout the project (as well as in other daily work), the teachers act as the group's "memory" and discuss with children the results of the documentation. This systematically allows children to revisit their own and others' feelings, perceptions, observations, and reflections, and then to reconstruct and reinterpret them in deeper ways. In reliving earlier moments via photography and tape recording, children are deeply reinforced and validated for their efforts and provided a boost to memory that is critical at their young age.



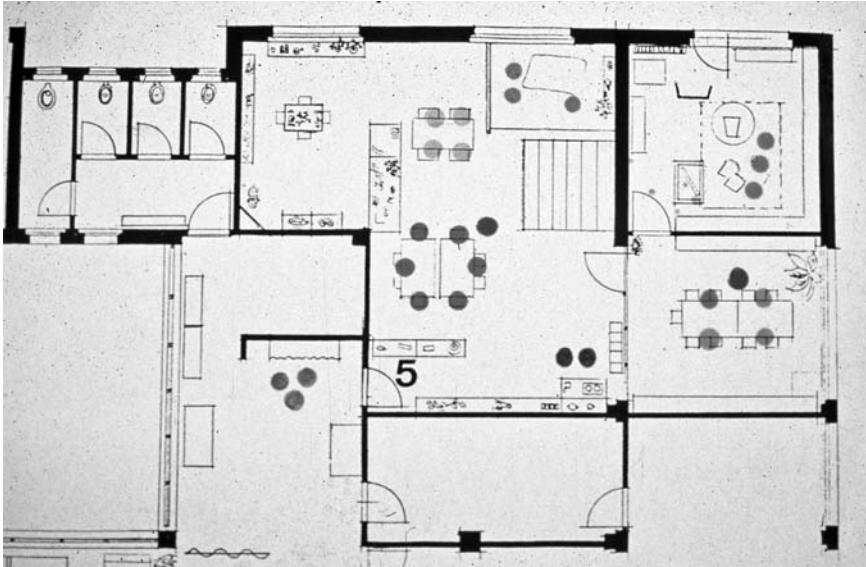
The teacher sometimes works inside the group of children and at other times outside, around the group. From either vantage point, the teacher observes and selectively documents the children's words, actions, interests, experiences, and activities. The teacher also observes and documents her own words and actions. Such observations are needed to interpret what is happening with the children and to make predictions and projections about how to go forward; on this basis, the teacher intervenes, joins with the children in their experiences and activity, and facilitates or provokes next occasions for learning—always in negotiation with the children and on the basis of agreement with them.

What is involved is finding a special idea, all together, toward which the work will be directed, and the project can last for quite some time—even weeks or months—if the idea catches on and work turns out well. (Malaguzzi, 1995, p. 10)

The teachers constantly pay close attention to the children's activity. They believe that when children work on a problem of interest to them, they will naturally encounter questions they will want to investigate. The teachers' role is to help children discover their own problems and questions.

At that point, moreover, they will not offer ready solutions but instead help children to focus on a problem or difficulty and formulate hypotheses. Their goal is not so much to "facilitate" learning in the sense of "making smooth or easy" but rather to "stimulate" it by making problems more complex, involving, and arousing. They ask the children what they need to conduct experiments—even when they realize that a particular approach or hypothesis is not "correct." They serve as the children's partners, sustaining the children and offering assistance, resources, and strategies to get "relaunched" when they are stuck. Often teachers encourage children to continue with something or ask them to complete or add to something that they are doing. They prefer not to leave children to always work on their own but try instead to cooperate with the children's goals.

While working with a group of children, each teacher takes notes, including descriptions of her own words and actions. The notes should be taken in ways that are understandable to others and able to be communicated because they will always be discussed with others. Discussions takes place at different levels involving groups of different sizes, ranging from discussions with a few others (co-teacher, *atelierista*, *pedagogista*), to meetings of the entire school staff, to workshops designated for particular types of teachers, to large assemblies of educators from the whole municipality. Such discussions are integral not only to curriculum planning but also to teacher professional development. Analytic and critical activities are vital to the development of the individual teacher and, ultimately, the Reggio Emilia system as a whole. Systematic documentation allows each teacher to become a producer of research—that is, someone who generates new ideas about curriculum and learning, rather than being merely a consumer of certainty and tradition.



Map of the 5-year-olds room at Diana Preschool during the morning activities. The dots indicate where children and teachers might be positioned one day. One teacher works closely with a group of 4, and another floats among all the others (but is with a group of 6 at present).

## THE SPECIAL DIFFICULTIES OF THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Educators in Reggio Emilia do not consider the teacher's role to be an easy one, with black and white answers guiding what teachers should do. They do possess, however, the confidence and sense of security that their approach to teaching, developed collectively over the past 50 years in Reggio Emilia, is the way they *should* be working. As teacher Laura Rubizzi put it, "It is a way of working not only valid but also right" (Interview, November 11, 1989). Her colleague at the Diana Preschool, Paola Strozzi, said: "We are part of a project that is based on the co-action of children, and on the sureness that this is a good way of learning" (Interview, June 14, 1990).

### Finding Challenging, Satisfying Problems

The day-to-day work, nonetheless, involves constant challenge and decision making because of the use of emergent, or "projected," curriculum. One difficult task for the teachers is to help children find problems that are big enough and hard

enough to engage their best energies and thinking over time. Many things happen every day; only some can be seized on. The teachers seek to discover what may be important and expected in the moments streaming by and then help the children breathe further life into them.

### Identifying “Knots”

Not only must the larger project contain meaty problems, but even a daily work session should ideally contain sticking points, or “knots.” Just as a knot (whorl) in wood grain impedes a saw cutting through it, and just as a knot (tangle) in thread stops the action of a sewing needle, any problem that stops the children and blocks their action is a kind of cognitive knot. It might be caused by a conflict of wills or lack of information or skills to proceed. Such knots should be thought of as more than negative moments of confusion and frustration, however. Rather, they are moments of cognitive disequilibrium, containing positive possibilities for regrouping, hypothesis testing, and intellectual comparison of ideas. They can produce interactions that are constructive not only for socializing but also for constructing new knowledge. The teachers’ task is to notice those knots and help bring them to center stage for further attention—launching points for next activities.

### Deciding When to Intervene

Teachers in Reggio have difficulty in knowing how and when to intervene because this depends on a moment-by-moment analysis of the children’s thinking. As teachers Magda Bondavalli and Marina Mori stated:

With regard to difficulties [in teaching], we see them continuously. The way we suggest to children things that they might do leaves things always open. This is a way to be with them through readjusting continuously. There is nothing that is definite or absolute. We try all the time to interpret, through their gestures, words, and actions, how they are living through an experience; and then we go on from there. It’s really difficult! (Interview, June 14, 1990)

Also in the United States, teachers worry about how much and when to intervene, how to support problem solving without providing the solution. Children are “dangerously on the brink between presence that they want and repression that they don’t want” (Malaguzzi, 1996, pp. 28–29). Thus, the teacher should not intervene too much and yet does not want to let a valuable teaching moment go by.

But you are always afraid that you are going to miss that hot moment. It’s really a balancing act. I believe in intervention, yet personally I tend to wait because I have noticed that children often resolve the problem on their own, and not always in the

way that I would have told them to! Children often find solutions that I would never have seen. But sometimes waiting means missing the moment. So it's a decision that you have to make very quickly. (Vea Vecchi, group discussion, October 18, 1990, Diana Preschool)

What they are describing here is a genuine commitment to emergent curriculum, not a subtle manipulation of the project theme so that it will end up in a certain place. The teachers honestly do not know where the group will end up. Although this openness adds a dimension of difficulty to their work, it also makes it more exciting:

I work in a state of uncertainty because I do not know where the children will arrive to, but it is a fabulous experience! (Interview, November 11, 1989)

[I]t is as if we are starting off together on a voyage. It could be short; it could be long. But there is an eagerness in doing it together. (Laura Rubizzi, group discussion, October 18, 1990, Diana Preschool)

Project work thus provides a supportive context for learning that takes off in unexpected directions, evoking

the idea of a dynamic process, a process that involves uncertainty and chance that always arises in relationships with others. Project work grows in many directions, with no predefined progression, no outcomes decided before the journey begins. (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 19)

Moreover, beyond being exciting, this way of working has the added advantage of the built-in support structures. The teacher is not expected to figure out what she should be doing all by herself. She always works in collaboration with other adults.

It's really the way to be in this school, where we compare notes continuously, and we talk to one another all the time. (Magda Bondavalli and Marina Mori, interview, June 14, 1990)

Such conferring takes place on an almost daily basis in short meetings between teacher and co-teacher, teacher and *atelierista*, and informal discussions between teachers of different classrooms at lunchtime (Strozzi, 2001). Teachers believe that by discussing openly, they offer models of cooperation and participation to the children and parents and promote an atmosphere of open and frank communication. More formal and extended analysis occurs during staff meetings of one's own school or some larger group meeting involving administrators, teachers from other schools, and perhaps even outside visitors or lecturers.

## A METHOD OF EXTENDED MUTUAL CRITICISM AND SELF-EXAMINATION

It is important to note that analysis and feedback in Reggio Emilia involves both support and criticism. In contrast to a system in which concern for hurt feelings or ownership of ideas prevents extended examination and argumentation, in Reggio Emilia intellectual conflict is considered pleasurable for both adults and children. As Paola Strozzi said, “I am convinced that there is some kind of pleasure in trying to agree about how to do things” (Interview, June 14, 1990). The point of a discussion is not just to air diverse points of view, but instead to go on until it is clear that everyone has learned something and moved somewhere in his or her thinking. A discussion should go on until a solution or next step becomes apparent; then tension dissipates and a new, shared understanding provides the basis for future joint activity or effort.

Certainly, teachers and staff members offer each another emotional support and encouragement as well as concrete suggestions and advice. In addition, however, a method of extended mutual criticism and self-examination is very much accepted and an important part of teacher professional development in Reggio Emilia, where a small work group—composed perhaps of teacher(s), mentor teacher, *pedagogista*, and *atelierista*—observe and document a group of children together, then meet for lengthy discussion, analysis, and comparison of perspectives on what they were seeing (Rubizzi, 2001). This work illustrates a fourth important aspect of the teacher’s role, *posing themselves important questions* (Malaguzzi, 1994).

Because it is difficult to describe to outsiders, this intensive process is sometimes simulated for study groups visiting Reggio Emilia. The simulation typically involves an introduction in which the small group who planned, conducted, and documented an experience with children will provide the audience or participants present with necessary context to enter the narration. They also will lay out the format and structure of the reflection phase to follow. Next, the documentation will be shown. Then, audience participants will engage in extended reflection on that documentation, listening respectfully to each speaker, following an implicit ethics giving everyone the right to participate (no one should dominate). Finally, each of the presenting educators will comment on and perhaps synthesize the reflections, offer final comments, and acknowledge the many insights offered and new questions raised.

As an example, Veà Vecchi (*atelierista*), Marina Mori (mentor teacher), and Loretta Bertani (teacher) led just such a simulation in October 2009 for an advanced study group, using as the documentation provocation a 27-minute videotape of a small group of children from the Robinson School working with clay. During the introductory phase, Marina provided necessary background and explained why the small group is the most favorable learning context for adults

as well as children. This was followed by the viewing of the videotape, independent reflection by participants (broken into three smaller subgroups, each with a recorder), sharing of the groups' reflections, and, finally, response and summary comments by the Reggio educators.

Critical reflection of this kind on documentation of teaching and learning has been going on for many years in Reggio Emilia, although specifics of the small group format vary from year to year, and situation to situation, according to the annual plans for professional development formulated by the Pedagogical Coordinating Team. Small-group reflection is a method that teachers greatly appreciate, whether they are new to teaching or possess many years of experience. As one experienced teacher noted:

Personally, I think we have debated very much [in our small groups], but I never felt that I was inadequate, or felt diminished when I was discussing. And I think that if you don't debate professionally, you won't grow. (Notes, "The Teachers Speak," feedback by teachers on working with a mentor teacher, Reggio Emilia, 2009)

Intellectual conflict is understood as the engine of all growth in Reggio. Therefore, teachers seek to bring out, rather than suppress, conflicts of viewpoints between children. Similarly, among themselves they readily accept disagreement

### LORIS MALAGUZZI LEADS A WORK GROUP DISCUSSING THE TEACHERS' DOCUMENTATION

Our research team of Lella Gandini, John Nimmo, and Carolyn Edwards, studying the growth of cooperation among children, observed and videotaped the working group of adults at the Diana Preschool in October 1990. Each meeting, held over 3 days, lasted several hours and included teachers, *atelierista*, *pedagogista*, auxiliary staff, and Loris Malaguzzi.

Malaguzzi opened the first meeting by explaining the benefits of collectively looking at a videotape, obtaining a range of interpretations ("circle of ideas"), then working toward a common understanding or point of view. Laura Rubizzi, one of the teachers, then presented her edited videotape showing three 4-year-old boys working together to make a clay dinosaur and talked about what questions she asked herself after reviewing the session, suggesting which aspects of teaching were most on her mind and challenging for her. Did she miss an occasion when she should perhaps have gotten the boys to discuss together? Did she miss an important "knot" to the session by failing to notice how one child tried to make a neck for the animal but then dropped the task  
(continued)

without having solved it? Finally, what should she have done to help the children gain more technical knowledge about how to stabilize three-dimensional clay structures?

At the second meeting, teacher Paola Strozzi presented an edited videotape of an activity in which four 3-year-olds had their second encounter with a new material. Paola explained to us how she presented the material (wire) to the children, what questions she asked them, and how she returned insights of individual children to the group. Her presentation was followed by a lengthy critique that addressed her pedagogical decisions. Had she overly “led” the children in creating verbal images about their constructions? Had she offered them an adequate range of materials so that they could compare and analyze the properties of wire? The next day, the wire activity was repeated with children, offering them a greater choice of wire thicknesses to study whether this change would lead to more experimentation and hypotheses.

At the third meeting, teacher Marina Castagnetti presented an edited videotape and behavioral analysis of a session involving two 5-year-old boys trying to draw a castle on a large piece of paper, using a Logo turtle activated by computer. She had created a behavior code and visually represented their whole interaction in a chart. Her presentation also led to lengthy discussion. Had the children been adequately prepared to solve the problem? Could they handle the computer commands? Did they need a set of rulers near at hand to stimulate ideas of measurement? Were they left too long to flounder on their own without the teacher’s assistance? Did Marina let a “hot moment” go by, or “abandon” the children too long? Did the children’s frequent language of joining (“Let’s do this,” “Let’s try this,” “Let’s see,” “We must,” and so on) indicate productive collaboration or increasing desperation? Marina eventually asked, “As a teacher, what was I supposed to do that I didn’t do?” but she was never offered a definitive right answer. The point of the discussion, evidently, was to think critically about difficult questions, not reach closure.

Our research team was impressed by the depth of discussion and lack of defensiveness by teachers. At the conclusion of the final meeting, we summarized our reactions to the working group and commented on their rigorous method of critical reflection. Loris Malaguzzi, with demonstrable affection for Marina, said, “Yes, we always have to have two pockets to reach into, one for satisfaction and one for dissatisfaction.” (Group discussion, October 16, 1991)

and expect extended discussion and constructive criticism; this is seen as the best way to advance. The teachers' pleasure in teamwork and acceptance of disagreement provides a model for children and parents.

## EXAMPLES OF TEACHER BEHAVIOR

To give a fuller picture and provide concrete examples of the abstract principles just presented, we offer several short examples drawn from various sources. They illustrate different kinds of teacher behavior commonly seen in the Reggio Emilia infant-toddler centers and preschools.<sup>2</sup>

### A Teacher Turns a Dispute Into a Shared Investigation

*September 29: The Contested Doll*

Laura and Silvia, both exactly 11.5 months old, sit next to each other on the carpet of the *Piccoli* ("Little ones") room of the Arcobaleno Infant-Toddler Center. They are playing with different objects. Laura holds a little soft doll that has a rattle inside.

When Silvia sees it, she wants it, and tries to take it from Laura. Laura resists briefly, then gives up the doll and bursts into desperate tears. Silvia witnesses this without reacting: she watches Laura cry but goes on holding on to the doll.

Only my intervention restores a little calmness between the little girls who, still next to each other, respond to my requests to point at the eyes, the nose, the hair of the doll.

This is the first time that Laura argues over a toy.

(Observation by teacher, Eluccia Forghieri, in Edwards & Rinaldi, 2008, pp. 39–40)<sup>3</sup>

### A Teacher Observes a Child's Purposeful Play, and Curiosity (of Both) Is Aroused

*October 12: Discovering the Drawer*

The desk drawer is half open, and Laura becomes curious and goes closer. Laura has been walking for a few days, and she reaches the desk. After opening the drawer a little more, and exploring it, she tilts her head and grabs a piece of paper. It's a very long paper with sticky labels, and Laura keeps pulling and pulling with large arm movements until all the paper is out. Laura's feet are completely covered by the paper, and the drawer is empty. Laura makes sure that there is no more paper in the drawer. She then looks at the long strip at her feet and picks it up, but she does not seem to think that this game is very exciting. What she finds interesting to repeat is the "emptying" game, and so she makes a connection (quite a brave one, we think) and she opens the other drawer, but then she looks





A page from the original Story of Laura, telling a story of infant exploration and surprise.

puzzled because she finds it empty. She is not convinced and she reopens the first drawer above, checks it again, and then she leaves, disappointed.

(Observation by teacher, Ivetta Fornaciari, in Edwards & Rinaldi, 2008, pp. 46–47)<sup>4</sup>

### Teachers Follow the Children's Interests

On the day of this incident, the block area of the 3-year-olds in the Diana Preschool has been set up so the two classroom teachers could videotape a “cooperation episode.” The teachers have prepared an inviting selection of blocks, tubes, and other lovely construction materials. Then something unexpected happens: the children discover a bug crawling through the blocks. Instead of interrupting, the teachers follow the children’s interest, shaping it rather than canceling it, letting it grow into a problem-solving collaboration involving quite a group of the children. Many questions are posed implicitly by the children through their words and actions—questions that could possibly be followed up on another day—about what kind of bug have they found, is it dead or alive, is it dangerous or harmless, how best to pick it up, is it afraid of them, does it have a name, is it weak or strong, is it bad or good, is it disgusting or beautiful, is it a he or she? Even when new children join the group trying to save the bug, they immediately pick up on the original themes and elaborate them, in a circle of cooperation.

At the beginning of the observation, two girls are seen, whom we shall call Bianca and Rosa. To their surprise, they encounter a bug among their blocks. Their teachers are nearby (one videotaping the scene), watching quietly.

Bianca says, “Yucky! How disgusting. It’s a real fly [a horsefly],” and Rosa responds, “It isn’t a big fly, because flies fly.”

Bianca observes, “Look, it’s dead,” but Rosa disagrees, saying, “No, it is moving its tail.”

Rosa declares, “He has a stinger! Stay far away!” Bianca, also, is worried, as she says, “No, no, let’s kill it!” Rosa repeats, “Look, he can sting you,” and Bianca embellishes her earlier idea, “Yes, but I said that we kill it. I have a real gun at my house. Let’s kill it! He moved! He isn’t dead. Help! Help!” Rosa now murmurs, “Yes, he is dead. Try to . . . Hello, hello.”

Bianca commands Rosa, “You kill it! You have pants on.” Rosa says, “No, it will sting me.” But Bianca counters, “No, not with your clothes he can’t.” Rosa isn’t having it; she says, “It can sting me even through my pants,” but Bianca says, “No, he can’t sting you through the pants.” Rosa insists, “He can sting me through the clothing.”

Their nearest teacher intervenes. “In my opinion, he would prefer to be back on his feet. You children try to flip him because he can’t flip himself, in my opinion. Why don’t you try to take him outside on the lawn? So maybe you could try to save him.”

The children accept this reframing. Rosa says, “Don’t be afraid. He doesn’t sting. Help me bring him outside. Grab the piece of paper [together] so we can carry him outside. We don’t have to use our hands.”

The commotion has attracted the other children. One child says, “We can carry him with the paper. Can you help me, Agnes?” Agnes says, “Yes, I can.”

Rosa now has new thoughts about the bug. She comments loudly, “Oh, how beautiful he is.” To the bug, she says comfortingly, “Don’t be afraid. We are helping you.” The children try to help lift the bug with a piece of paper. They utter various comments, “Not that way. Oh, poor thing. Grab this end of the paper. He even knows how to walk! You ought not to let him die! All right, what the heck, I will help you. Look, it walks! He is able to walk also. Did you see—Was I good? Where did he go? He is inside there [pointing], inside the paper. Here or here? Let’s look. Let’s open it [a roll of paper]. Where is it? Oh, it is there.” Rosa looks and says, “Where? It is tiny. Oh, there it is!”

The children carry it, but then drop it. The teacher tells one child, “You aren’t helping [with the carrying],” but that child protests, “I am helping.” Another child cries out, “Help me, fence him in. Come on, help me. Yes, he is fenced in.”

The second teacher now speaks up, “For sure, he is getting away. What would you like to do? Try to carry him outside.”

The children try to carry the bug outside. Various children call out, “Oh, it fell. It hurt itself. It [the bug] is good. The bug is afraid. No, it is not afraid. Yes, it is

afraid. It has fallen. No. He is afraid.” Someone declares, “You killed him.” This arouses many more comments from the group: “You have to believe, so you can save him. Look, look. You ought not to let him die. Yes, he is beautiful. He is very beautiful and good. I don’t want to let him die. Let us put him in here. Put him in here. We must not let him die. Don’t step on him.”

One girl tries calling the bug, giving it a name, “Come here, beautiful. Beautiful, come here, *Topolone* (“Big Mousie”). Another child responds to her, “He doesn’t want to come. Be careful or he will wind up squashed.”

The children check on the bug’s status. One boy declares, “He is still alive.” The second teacher confirms, “He is still alive.” She encourages the children, “Well, then, let’s get him.” A boy says, “He went under the table,” and the second teacher guides, “Okay, grab him and take him outside.”

The children are triumphant, “We captured him! We captured him. He doesn’t want to get down [off the paper]. We got him! We are great!” Once outside, they let the bug go, saying, “He won’t get down. Let’s leave him, there, poor thing. Don’t squash him. She’s beautiful. Where is she?”

(Videotape from the cooperation study of Edwards, Gandini, & Nimmo, 1994)

### A Teacher Provides Instruction in Tool Use and Technique

It is a morning in May 1988 in the *piazza* of Diana Preschool where teacher Paola Notari is working with eight 3-year-olds and large mounds of artists’ modeling clay. She provides the children instruction in the correct use of the materials and tools as part of the process of facilitating, supporting, and encouraging. When asked about this, she says she tries to provide the help and advice that is needed for children to accomplish their own artistic and representational goals and not be defeated by the materials. For example, she knows that if children roll out the clay too thin, then it breaks during firing and children are upset.

The children are seated around a long rectangular table, while Paola stands and moves among them. In front of each is a large wooden tablet on which to work the clay. Paola is preparing each child a flat slab of clay: she tears off a hunk of clay, rolls it out thin with a rolling pin, cuts off the sides to make a neat square, then gives it out. She is using a knife to cut the clay and says, “This tool we can use to cut the clay when it is nice and thick.”

The children have many cutting and rolling tools nearby. They are working on the problem of “representing movement, on a surface.” With a knife, they can cut out a piece of the clay, then fold it up and over to give a sense of motion on the surface of the slab. (She explains later that some of the children don’t actually succeed in getting any sense of movement into theirs. But Paola doesn’t interfere and insist on her idea of movement. Because all are very involved in what they are doing, she does not impose her ideas on them. However, she does instruct them on matters of technique—showing them how to roll and cut the clay and use the tools.)



The teacher notices that children need help with something they are trying to do with the clay. First, she points and tells.



Then she decides they need her to actually show them what she means.

At the beginning of the episode, Paola is seen using a spatula to give a newly rolled slab of clay to a child. “Do you need this?” she asks. She tells another, “You are pressing too much. If you press too much, we will not be able to pick it up, and then we will not be able to fire it in the kiln. Don’t press too hard.” Then another child turns to her, “Is this all right?” “Yes, yes,” Paola replies, “That’s fine. If you want another slab of clay, I can prepare one for you.”

She observes a little disagreement between two children. One wants the pastry cutter that the other has been using. That child protests, “This is mine. I had it before.” “But they are all the same,” says Paola, pointing out more cutters. “They really are all the same.” She moves closer, and the first child shows her that in fact the desired cutter makes a different kind of track in the clay than the others. So she revises her opinion, “Oh, I see. Well, if you look in the tool box, there you will find another, precisely like this one.” The child goes off happily to look.

She begins to prepare a slab of clay for one of the girls and, while doing so, looks up at the child opposite her. “What are you doing?” she asks. The boy shows, and Paola says, “That’s nice.”

Finishing the new slab, she takes it over to the girl needing it. Seeing her first piece, Paola comments, “Look at that marvel! Now you have to think about what else you want to do. You could put the same marks in it [the new slab] you did before. Of you could place these pieces folded, or standing up.” She demonstrates, using little strips of clay. The little girl has in her hand a pastry cutter, which she moves over the slab without saying anything. Paola continues, “You only want to cut with this little wheel, don’t you? It does make very beautiful marks.”

Paola goes to the opposite side of the table where a very small child seems to be having difficulties. She asks him, “May I clean it up for you?” Her hand smoothes down his slab, using slip. She explains to him, “This is sort of like an eraser. And now I will show you how to use this tool [a cutter]. You can make a thin strip, like this, and fold it or pick it up.” She shows him to lift one end of the strip. Then she puts the cutter into his hand and standing behind him, guides him in the use of both his hands. “With this hand, hold the clay. Now with this other hand, push very hard. More. This way. Okay? Now you can do it.”

A little later, she asks all the children at large, “Do you want more clay? I can go get it.” The children shout, “Also I!” “Also I!” “Okay,” Paola says, “I’m going to get some more.” She goes out of the room for a few minutes, leaving the children alone for a few moments. The observation continues in the same way when she returns.

(From a videotape in Carolyn Edwards’s collection)

### **A Teacher Scaffolds Conceptual Understanding**

In an episode recounted by Veia Vecchi (2010), the children in Marina Mori’s classroom at the Diana Preschool are found drawing their classmate Sewaa. In

a way that is customary in Reggio, children are divided into groups around the model, each with a different perspective.

One girl, Laura, wanders around and stops to speak to Martina, who is sitting at Sewaa's side. Laura tells Martina that what she has done isn't right. In a friendly way, she says, "You've drawn Sewaa as if she was like this, in front of you. . . . Instead you were supposed to draw her like this . . . from the side . . . in profile . . . with only one eye, only one leg, only one ear." She shows Martina her own side-view drawing, putting them side by side to compare. Martina, at first surprised, seems little by little to understand what Laura is trying to show her.

Marina, the teacher, comes close to Martina and says in a kindly way, "The drawing you have made is lovely." She pauses, then goes on to say, "But, to see it like this, where would you have to be sitting?" Martina points to the groups who can see Sewaa from the side, "There, at that table there."

Here is how Veà Vecchi analyzes Marina's method of intervention:

The teacher does not say that the drawing is mistaken, rather she underlines that the drawing is a nice one, neither does she ask the child to redo it, but by her question she sanctions the difference between two points of view, front and side. Highly respectful of the child's sensibility, she does not immediately confront her with a further test in drawing because, by her reply, Martina shows that she has taken a first step toward understanding the problem, which is not simply a drawing problem but conceptual. There will be other times for advancing this awareness she has just acquired. (Vecchi, 2010, p. 52)

(The full story, illustrated with photographs and the children's drawings, is described by Vecchi, 2010, pp. 51–53.)

### **A Teacher Relaunches a Project**

In an investigation that involves mathematical thinking, the children at Diana Preschool are confronted with a real-life problem. How can they give all the necessary measurements to the carpenter so he can build them a new work table just like their old one? Five boys and one girl from the class of 5-year-olds have volunteered to work together on the problem.

In one of their initial encounters, Marina Castagnetti, teacher, invites the children to stand around their old table and offer their thoughts of how to measure it. Alan suggests, "You count and you measure with your fingers. You put one finger after the other, you count to 5 on your other hand and then up to 10." The children pursue this idea, then do some drawings, then continue measuring the table with their body parts. Eventually abandoning the idea of fingers, they next try measuring with their fists, their hand spans, and finally using their legs. One child even tries using his head. The children have moved from one unit of measurement to another without arriving at a definite choice. They are a bit stuck.

Marina and Veà Vecchi sit down together to study the observations that have been collected thus far and try to come up with an idea of how to support the



The children try using their body parts to measure the length of their table. They try with their fingers, hands, feet, even their hand. Eventually they become a bit stuck. What will the teacher do to help them out?

children. They reread the notes and hypothesize that the adults need to “push the children further into the disorder that they have created” as a way to accentuate the contradictions of their thinking. Perhaps this will help the children progress in their understanding.

In a next meeting, Marina suggests that the children try making long jumps and then measuring them. She asks them, “How can you measure your jumps?” The children reply, “You need two marks, one for the start and one for the finish, and you measure with your feet.”

Tommaso makes a jump and then measures the distance, putting one foot in front of the other. His jump is four “feet” long. Now Marina measures the same distance with her feet, and it’s three “feet” long.

Marco and Daniela jump next, and both times, the children’s measurements are longer than Marina’s. Finally, the children discover what is going on. They tell her, “Your foot is bigger, and it takes up more space. We have little feet.”

This project continues on for many meetings, with the children using string, then their shoes, and eventually paper measuring sticks they have drawn themselves, as they construct knowledge for themselves and retrace the path of human history in understanding the need for a standard unit of measurement.

(The full episode, illustrated with photographs and the children’s drawings, is described by Marina Castagnetti and Veia Vecchi, 1997, pp. 19–31.)

## CONCLUSIONS

The role of the teacher in Reggio Emilia shows many similarities to the role as commonly conceived in the United States. In both settings, goals are set high—as ideals that are expected to be difficult to attain and sustain in practice. In both, early childhood education involves complex interaction with multiple constituencies

(children, parents, colleagues, government, the public) and stimulating children's learning and development through the design of optimal school organization, physical environments, curriculum, and pedagogy. In Reggio Emilia, however, the infant-toddler or preschool teacher always works with a co-teacher. As a pair, these two relate to the other teachers, auxiliary staff, and the *atelierista* in their school and, moreover, receive support from *pedagogisti*, mentor teachers, cultural mediators, as well as staff assigned to the Documentation and Educational Research Center, REMIDA (the Recycling Center), and other laboratories and resource centers. They also interact and have a continuous dialogue with parents who support them and participate in the life of the school.

In their interaction with children, Reggio Emilia teachers seek to promote children's well-being and encourage learning in all domains (cognitive, physical-motor, social, and affective), at the same time taking advantage of key moments to instruct children in ever-more-sophisticated use of tools and materials needed to express themselves in the multiple symbolic and artistic media. From their own point of view, the teachers' classroom work centers on "provoking occasions" of genuine intellectual growth by one or more children—in particular, listening to the words and communications of children and then offering them back to the group to restimulate and extend their discussion and joint activity. Such a method of teaching they consider important, complex, and delicate, constantly evolving and changing, and a matter of collective effort and concern. Their tendency to engage with colleagues in extended mutual criticism and self-examination of their teaching behavior seems to distinguish the educators of Reggio Emilia. Just as they see children as learning best through communication, conflict, and co-action, so do they see themselves as learning in this way. They see the work and development of teachers as a public activity taking place within the shared life of the school, community, and culture; they place a strong value on themselves communicating and interacting within and outside the school. Striving to fulfill these ideals is demanding, they well know, but rewarding and sustaining as well, and vital to the progress of society and human well-being.

## NOTES

1. Max Wertheimer (1982) famously described watching two boys playing badminton. One of the boys was much better than the other, and as the game went on, this older boy kept winning easily, and the younger boy's play became worse and worse. Then the boys decided to play a new game, where the objective was to see how many turns they could keep the birdie up in the air. Now both boys began to work in a complementary way, as the older boy had to adjust his play to assist the younger boy's efforts. The younger boy's playing improved, and both boys threw themselves into playing with effort and enjoyment.

2. Other vivid examples of teacher behavior were published in the second edition of this book. They can be found in "Partner, Teacher, and Guide: Examples of Teacher Behavior in Reggio Emilia." Available at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/503>.



3. Quotations from Edwards & Rinaldi, 2008, edited by Carolyn Edwards and Carlina Rinaldi, copyright 2009 by Carolyn Edwards, the Municipality of Reggio Emilia–Istituzione Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, and Reggio Children S.r.l. Reprinted with permission of Redleaf Press, St. Paul, MN ([www.redleafpress.org](http://www.redleafpress.org)).

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