CHAPTER TWO

From the Beginning of the *Atelier* to Materials as 100 Languages

Loris Malaguzzi's Thoughts and Strategies

Lella Gandini

The first city preschools in Reggio Emilia started back in 1963 with the Robinson School. The schools were directly inspired by the same mission to create better opportunities for all children that had guided the small, spontaneous schools built and run by parents in 1945 at the very end of the Second World War. However, the intent of Loris Malaguzzi, who guided their evolution, was specifically focused on innovation. This intent was based on his conviction that Children are born with many resources and extraordinary potentials, which never cease to amaze us. They have autonomous capacities for constructing their own thoughts, questions and attempts at answers. Therefore, schools have a new task: rather than child-minding they have to open up to observation, research and experimentation by teachers who, together with children, participate in constructing a new culture of education. (Loris Malaguzzi, personal communication with Lella Gandini, 1993)

EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL CHOICES

The construction of this new culture in preschools was brought about by Malaguzzi in several ways. The first was by means of research, through reading and discussing with teachers writings by John Dewey, Lev S. Vygotsky, Erik Erikson, and other philosophers of education, whose works had only recently been translated into Italian. A second way was through visiting other preschools that progressive city governments were opening in Italy and keeping informed about educational experiments taking place abroad. In France, for example, there were schools that used the techniques of Celestin Freinet, and in Switzerland there was the Geneva school guided by collaborators of Jean Piaget. Finally, a third, essential way was to support the evolving culture of education that was emerging from seminars for teachers and parents led by progressive pedagogical leaders such as Bruno Ciari, a well-known, progressive coordinator

of the preschools in Bologna, and Gianni Rodari, a writer and activist in education (*The Hundred Languages of Children*, 1987).

In 1965, when two new city preschools opened, Malaguzzi had the idea to employ teachers with an education in the visual arts in the role of assistants, because the funding available for schools was too low to hire them as teachers. This was the way he hound to have the first ***atelieristi***, since these were teachers whose education had oriented them toward valuing children's languages of expression. Rather than naming the space dedicated to creative exploration with children an "art room," Malaguzzi chose the French term "***atelier***," which evoked the idea of a laboratory for many types of transformations, constructions, and visual expressions. Therefore the teacher working with children on visual expression was named ***atelierista***, rather than "art teacher."

Still another initiative undertaken by Malaguzzi was to seek public support for educational reform. He needed to make a statement to the citizens of Reggio Emilia about the importance of preschools, and offer proof of his beliefs. The was 1966, and the way he chose to do this was to make the young children's creative expression and autonomous desire to be engaged, to discover, and to learn as visible as possible. An *atelierista* from Anna Frank School wrote that with Malaguzzi, the teacher brought paper and painting materials into the center of the city and set up them up under the colonnade of the theater. The children set to painting out in the public for all to see, and people crowded around, expressed surprise, and asked many questions (see Figure 2.1). All this was done in conjunction with an exhibit of children's drawings from preschools of the whole province (Manicardi, quoted in Baldini et al., 2012. p. 93).

Figure 2.1. "Once a week we would transport the school, (the children and our tools,) to town.... The children were happy. The people saw; they were surprised and they asked questions." (Gandini, 2012, p. 31)

CITY REGULATIONS ABOUT THE STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF PRESCHOOLS

In the late 1960s and early 1970s women, working women especially, were very actively asking for more equitable social laws and for participation in decision making. There was also a great deal of street protest by workers and students. Among notable changes that followed these active interventions was a national law passed in 1968 that established free education for all children from 3 years to 6 years of age. This connected with the existing free public education for children from the age of 6 to 18. In 1971 a national law established infant/toddler centers for children from 3 months to 3 years of age. In 1972 another national law established participation by a council of elected parents and students in the running of public schools all over Italy.

In that same year the city government of Reggio Emilia, after long deliberations, created a new "rulebook" of principles and organization for the education of children 0 to 6 years of age. The main points established included the following:

- The continuity of education for young children from 3 months to 6 years
- A pedagogical-coordination-support team of **pedagogisti** and psychologists
- Participation by parents to infant/toddler centers and preschools for children with special needs
- An atelier and an atelierista in each preschool and each infant/toddler center
- Two teachers per classroom as co-teachers
- Permanent collegial work and professional development in each preschool or infant toddler center for all teachers, atelieristi, cooks, and auxiliary personnel
- Recognition of the value of the indoor and outdoor environments as spaces for learning, including kitchens, bathrooms, and outdoor spaces (Regulations for the Municipal Preschool, 1972, translation of p. 119)

MALAGUZZI'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE *ATELIER*

Beginning with the Robinson School and then the other preschools after 1963, Malaguzzi intended to experiment deliberately with different disciplines and different materials in appropriate spaces (see Figure 2.2). Yet the *atelier* and the *atelieristi* became *officially* part of the schools on in 1972 with the new rulebook. Over time Malaguzzi worked out his thoughts, hopes, and observations about the

Figure 2.2. The Diana School *atelier.*

atelier. In his words that follow, we can directly see how his language is rich, complex, and dense; it is poetic as well and thus invites careful reflection because it offers many layers of meaning.

The role of the *atelier*, integrated and combined within the general framework of learning and teaching strategies, was conceptualized as a retort for the marginal role commonly assigned to expressive education. It also was intended as a reaction against the concept of the education of young children based mainly on words and simpleminded rituals.

First of all, the *atelier* had to be viewed as instrumental in the recovery of the image of the child, which we now saw as richer in resources and interests than we had understood before. This new child had the right to a school that was more aware and more focused, a school made up of professional teachers. In this way we also rescued our teachers, who had been humiliated by the narrowness of their preparatory schools, by working with them on their professional development.

Within our framework of many cultural and theoretical influences, we had to reinvent the original meaning of the *atelier* as an artisan's or artist's workshop. For us the *atelier* had to become part of a complex design and at the same time an added space for searching, or better, for *digging* with one's own hands and one's own mind, and for refining one's own eyes, through the practice of the

visual arts. It had to be a place for sensitizing one's taste and aesthetic sense, a place for the individual exploration of **projects** connected with the experiences planned in the different classrooms of the school.

The *atelier* had to be a place for researching motivations and theories of children from scribbles on up, a place for exploring variations in tools, techniques, and materials with which to work. It had to be a place favoring children's logical and creative itineraries, a place for becoming familiar with similarities and differences of verbal and nonverbal languages.

Our intent was to drive the school in richer, more complex, and rigorous directions, and toward new anthropological and cultural paths. As you can see, this was an ambitious and vast process. From the beginning we concentrated on the observation of the explorations, of processes, and of strategic theories of children, as premises for studying, analyzing, and reflecting on hypotheses, and proposals for the action of teachers.

We were convinced that, in the case of both children and adults, it was valid to use the rule stated by David Hawkins, who said that it was necessary to become familiar first by using directly what you know and what you have learned in order to acquire further learning and knowledge.

The taking over of the school by the *atelier* and by the *atelierista*, a teacher with preparation from an art school, as organizer, interpreter, co-organizer, and collaborator (a role to be continually reinvented en route), intentionally created a disturbance for the dated model of school for young children. School, in our case, had already been modified by the presence of two co-teachers in each classroom, by the collegiality of work, by the participation of families, and by the cooperation of the school with the community council. Our school had already guaranteed the practice of working with the same children the for the continuum of three years, and had been enriched by the opening of the infant/toddler centers.

The genesis of the *atelier* coincided with the genesis of a new overal educational project: systemic, lay (non-religious), and progressive. By and by, the atelier could develop through crises connected with social change and the historic situation; these led to various results, including a reformulation of our theory and practice. The one stable element was an equal respect for the plurality and the connections within children's expressive languages.

Throughout, it has been necessary to keep battling against the old but solid culture of antonyms, which sets up pairs of opposites rather than considering making connections. The tendency is unfortunately to place: behaviors versus morality; reason versus fantasy; the individual versus the group; expressiveness versus cognition.

Technology brough the camera, the tape recorder, the video recorder. the photocopy machine, the computer, and so on into the *atelier*. The school continually needs more tools, appropriate architectures, and wider spaces; it cannot risk falling behind.

We have to convince ourselves that expressive competencies grow and mature their languages near and far from home, and that children discover with us the friendliness of actions, of languages, of thoughts and meanings. We have to convince ourselves that it is essential to preserve in children (and in ourselves) the feeling of wonder and surprise, because creativity, like knowledge, is a daughter of surprise.

We have to convince ourselves that expressivity is an art, a combined construction (not immediate, not spontaneous, not isolated, not secondary); that expressivity has motivations, forms and procedures, contents (formal and informal), and that the ability to communicate the predictable and unpredictable.

Expressivity finds sources from play, as well as from practice, from study, from emotions, from intuition, from chance, and from rational imagination and transgressions. In fact, drawing, painting, and the use of all languages are experiences and explorations of life, of the senses, and of meanings. They are an expression of urgency, desires, reassurance, research, hypothesis, readjustments, constructions, and inventions. They follow the logic of exchange, and of sharing. They produce solidarity, communication with oneself, with things and with others. They offer interpretations and intelligence about the events that take place around us. (See Figure 2.3.)

Formulas? There are none. There are only possible strategies. Make sure, above all, that children become familiar in their minds with images, that they know how

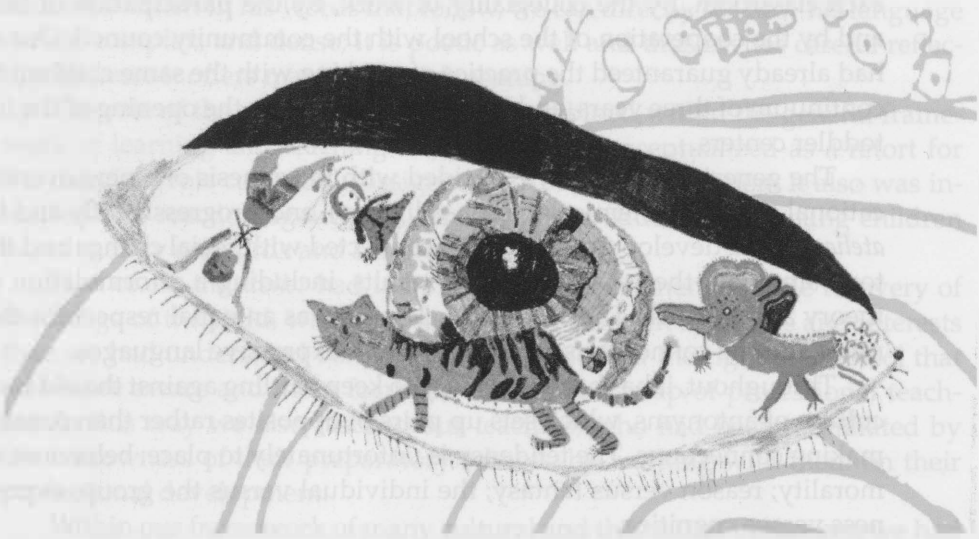

Figure 2.3. "The eye is shaped like a puddle ... Then the things that you look at are reflected in the eye. Blue and black eyes see a little bit differently: blue eyes see lighter, black eyes see darker. Sometimes the eye is happy." (Baldini, Cavallini, & Vecchi, 2012, p. 170)

to keep them alive, that they learn the pleasure of reactivating them, regenerating them, and multiplying them with the maximum amount of personal and creative intervention. It is an essential requirement that the images be good and meaningful for children and for adults. For it is only then that those images, combined and recombined (and not always in a linear or cumulative way) in the form of realism, of resemblances, of logic, of imagination, and of symbolism, will become signs that carry meanings. This is the only procedure: difficult and uncertain but, perhaps, the decisive one (Carini, 1988).

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN EDUCATION AND VISUAL EXPRESSION

Malaguzzi wrote commentaries for the catalogues of a sequence of exhibits of children's work: *When the Eye Jumps Over the Wall* (1980) and *The Hundred Languages of Children* (1987). He was aware of the power of the documentation that was produced through the educational creative work of the teachers and *atelieristi* with the support of the pedagogical coordinators. This documentation served not only as information and communication to parents or as advocacy for the development and opening of new schools for young children by the city administration, but also as a way of creating great interest among educators from other Italian cities and European countries. Inevitably and rapidly this interest spread to educators at schools and universities in the United States and gradually to other countries all over the world.

Exhibits with the intent of showing the work of children had begun very soon in Reggio Emilia after the opening of the first city schools in 1963 and 1964. Then, in the following years of rapid social change, the presence of the *atelier* and *atelieristi*, continuous reflection and re-thinking, through interdisciplinary exchanges and research, all combined to bring about a gradual but deep transformation. The innovative philosophical and pedagogical thinking that Malaguzzi and his various collaborators had constructed became a cultural project that had to be made visible. The principal goal-and challenge-was to render visible and readily understandable their research and documentation about the active role of children. Children involved in their learning experiences showing their competencies in different expressive languages (see Figure 2.4). Thus by 1980 they had constructed and launched a way to communicate this educational process by means of an exhibit that they named *When the Eye Jumps Over the Wall*. By this title they implied that one could see the potential of children and learning only if one were to overcome the wall of traditional educational commonplaces and conceptions. The intellectual underpinning of the exhibit drew heavily upon the dated but still valuable lessons by Foebel, Agazzi, and Montesorri, but certainly more upon the vital pedagogical reflections of Dewey, Vygotsky, Erikson, Piaget, Schaffer, Hawkins, and other contemporary thinkers. This exhibit traveled to many

Figure 2.4. The atelier of the Infant/Toddler Center Belelli with toddlers and teacher Lucia Colla.

countries in increasingly complex versions until finally, in 1987, it arrived for the first time in the United States, in San Francisco. It was accompanied by a new catalogue, beautifully illustrated and translated into English; this new version bore the name *The Hundred Languages of Children* (1987).

"The Pleasure of Understanding"

Among the commentaries by Malaguzzi in the catalogue of the Hundred Languages exhibit are several succinct reflections that convey his version; for example:

> The pleasure of learning of knowing and understanding is one of the most important and basic feelings that each child expects to receive from the experience he or she is living through: either alone, with other children or with adults. It is a constructive feeling that must be reinforced so that the connected pleasure lasts even when reality may prove that learning, knowing and understanding can be difficult and require effort. It is through this very capacity of overcoming the difficulty that pleasure transforms itself into joy. (The Hundred Languages of Children, 1987, p. 22)

Languages of Expression: The Seven Points

The same Hundred Languages catalogue contained an extraordinary compression of so much of Malaguzzi's thought into the following seven essential points:

1. First, we recognize that the human species has the privilege of expressing itself through a plurality of languages, besides the spoken language.
2. We recognize that every lanugage has the right to realize itself fully, and in the process it becomes part of other languages enriching them as well.
3. We recognize that all expressive, cognitive and communicative languages that are formed through reciprocity are born and develop through experience.
4. We recognize that a child is a constructor and co-author of these lanugages and participates in contributing to their historical and cultural variations.
5. We recognize that all the languages that are already co-existent in the mind and in the activity of the child have the power to be generative of other languages, other actions and other potentials that are in turn generative.
6. We recognize that all these languages need to be considered with equal dignity and value. They should receive support and adequate competent support from the adults and the environment.
7. And finally we wonder what support and understanding these propositions might reeive in the current cultural and educational approach toward children's learning of today. (*The Hundred Languages of Children*, 1987, pp. 22-23)

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Credits: Quotations from Loris Malaguzzi from Carini, E. (1988, December 12). Se l'atelier e dentro una lunga storia e ad un progetto educativo: Intervista a Loris Malaguzzi. [If the *atelier* is within a long history and within an overall educational project: Interview with Loris Malaguzzi.] *Bambini, 4,* 8-14. Bergamo, Italy: Edizioni Junior. ***Figure*** 2.1 from *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach Advanced Reflections.* ***Figure*** 2.2 from *Open Window.* ***Figure*** 2.3 from *The Hundred Languages of Children-Catalogue* of the exhibition (1996/2005). ***Figure*** 2.4 from *The Park Is* . . . All© Municipality of Reggio Emilia-Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools, published by Reggio Children, s.r.l., Via Bligny 1/A, 42124 Reggio Emilia, Italia, www.reggiochildren.it