

A School that Knows Me: Reggio Emilia and the Lab School

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Children have a hundred (or more) innate ways to express themselves. Traditional (academic) schools and cultures that emphasize memorization-based-learning rob children of the opportunity to use most of these languages as a means of self expression and exploration. So says The Hundred Languages of Children, a poem by Loris Malaguzzi, the visionary behind the famous community preschools originating in the town of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Malaguzzi's poem reflects his perspective that children are active learners who have the need and the right to construct their own understanding of the world through exploration (*constructivism*). As an educational philosopher and activist in post-World War II Italy, Malaguzzi created his own schools where the community, families and teachers could come together to support young children's internally motivated learning. Now that his schools are internationally acclaimed, his vision has inspired many schools all over the world to become more open to the idea that children are active learners. Our school is no exception. The classrooms at the ECL embed elements of many philosophies and curriculum models that give each room its own flavor, but all of our programs focus on the concept of constructivist learning, just as Loris Malaguzzi did. Our classrooms also reflect his vision in that parents and the community are involved in children's learning, teachers engage children in exploration, children's ideas are integrated into classroom curriculum, and children's classroom work is written up and displayed (*documentation*).

Malaguzzi suggests that schools need community involvement to thrive. How are parents and the community involved at the ECL? From the first day, ECL staff value parents as experts on their children and valuable contributors to the classroom curriculum. At the fall home visits, teachers and families can get to know each other in a familiar setting. Then, and at Open House, teachers continue to learn about



children's passions, so that when children begin class they can find favorite toys and projects on the classroom shelves. This provides a starting place for room design that reflects the community that will be using the room.

Once the children arrive at school and begin their explorations, teachers stay in close contact with families through notes and conversations. Parents are encouraged to share home cultures, snacks, songs and celebrations. Parents and teachers join together on Work Day to make the classrooms and yards beautiful places for learning and investigation. Additionally, teachers invite community members to join the classroom as "experts" on topics of interest, such as sea life or reptiles. Older children go on field trips where they extend their knowledge about favorite topics. The preschool classroom that worked hard to investigate how farms and vegetables work, then took a field trip to the farmer's market is one example of how children can learn from the community. Other adventures have ranged from the duck pond at the Arboretum to the fire station and to grassy hills that feature public art. Upon returning to their classrooms, many children choose to recreate their ideas of what the community is about and what they saw

and felt in their art, discussion and dramatic play. We can see the richness of our community reflected in children's play and discussions.

It is not just family and community that impact the child's learning. Malaguzzi notes that at the Reggio Emilia schools the teachers have a unique role in supporting children's learning. Teachers, he notes, should see themselves as co-learners, recorders and



facilitators of children's explorations. This is far different from the traditional image of teachers as the disseminators of facts and adult directed curriculum plans. Here at the ECL we strongly agree with Malaguzzi's vision, and our program coordinators, teachers and caregivers spend their time in the classroom following the children's lead, forming close relationships with them and becoming trusted partners in their *exploration* (the process by which children learn through play and experimentation). Adults in our classrooms ask open-ended questions and provide materials and support for children as they work. As the explorations of the topics evolve, we photograph, quote and (when age appropriate) collect artwork to reflect the process of the children's learning. We display this documentation for the classroom community. We believe that all these actions support the children as they explore their world and express their ideas through their hundred languages.

One unique characteristic of the Reggio Emilia approach is that the classroom environment, the yard, and the surrounding community are collectively considered to be "*the third*" teacher. What does this look like? The items in the classrooms and yards are chosen with care each week to reflect children's current interests. In our classrooms we seriously consider the resources of our "*third teacher*" as we plan our weekly classroom design and adventures. We know that the children use whatever they see and interact with to create an image of how the world works.

So what do we do with all this information that we are collecting about children's learning? Here at the ECL, like in Italy, children explore topics of interest through project based investigation that is written up and displayed for all to see. How does the process work? As children investigate a topic, they are encouraged to question what they are seeing, "I wonder why that could have happened?" teachers and caregivers ask. Teachers take notes about what they see and photograph children in action. In addition, older children can show their learning using many of their languages, such as drawing, dramatic play, dance, sculpture, oral language and writing. Their reflection, often done in small groups with an adult, leads children to learn, revise their theories about the world, and then show the community what they have explored. The resulting documentation is displayed attractively at the children's eye level so that children can re-visit their investigations and continue to expand on their previous learning.

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As our infants and toddlers grow older and enter the pre-

school programs, we hope that our sensitive support of their learning process will lead them to be active explorers in the rooms and yards. We hope that their current sensory experimentation will empower them to use art materials to express their ideas. Our dream for all the children in the ECL classes is that they will be unafraid to use their "Hundred Languages" to express their ideas about the world. What a gift we can give to our future scientists, explorers, artists and dreamers.

The following is Loris Malaguzzi's poem,

The Hundred Languages of Children

Invece il cento c'è

Il bambino
è fatto di cento.
Il bambino ha
cento lingue
cento mani
cento pensieri
cento modi di pensare
di giocare e di parlare
cento sempre cento
modi di ascoltare
di stupire di amare
cento allegrie
per cantare e capire
cento mondi
da scoprire
cento mondi
da inventare
cento mondi
da sognare.
Il bambino ha
cento lingue
(e poi cento cento cento)
ma gliene rubano novantanove.
La scuola e la cultura
gli separano la testa dal corpo.
Gli dicono:
di pensare senza mani
di fare senza testa
di ascoltare e di non parlare
di capire senza allegrie
di amare e di stupirsi
solo a Pasqua e a Natale.
Gli dicono:
di scoprire il mondo che già c'è
e di cento
gliene rubano novantanove.
Gli dicono:
che il gioco e il lavoro
la realtà e la fantasia
la scienza e l'immaginazione
il cielo e la terra
la ragione e il sogno
sono cose
che non stanno insieme.
Gli dicono insomma
che il cento non c'è.
Il bambino dice:
invece il cento c'è.

The child is made of one hundred.

The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.

A hundred.

Always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling, of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.

The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and at Christmas.

They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.

Teachers, ... should see
themselves as co-learners,
recorders and facilitators
of children's explorations



They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.

And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

Further reading about Reggio Emilia and emergent curriculum:

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