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## Inviting children into project work.

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SOUTHERN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION

# DIMENSIONS

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MELISSA BURTON

Projects: The Reggio Emilia approach

## Inviting children into project work

Projects combine two things that teachers love dearly — play and investigation (Katz and Chard, 1989). Here is a narrative that illustrates the valuable learning experiences that projects can provide:

One day after a rainstorm five-year-old children noticed a large puddle in the schoolyard and asked to go outside to play. As they explored the puddle, stamping their boots, floating leaves, and making circles by casting pebbles, they noticed that their reflections were upside down. This discovery surprised them and led them to pose many questions and hypotheses.

**A teacher began to take photographs as the children were playing and talking about their discovery. When they came back inside, the teachers helped the children continue the discussion.** The children began to elaborate on what would happen in a world upside down. One child suggested that everything would be upside down: people that wanted to cry would laugh; people that got angry would be nice; if you said “quick” it would come out “slow”; if you said “sour cream” it would come out “ice cream” or even “cream ice!” Another child speculated how people would act if they were always standing on their heads (“Would they walk on the ceiling rather than on the floor?”), and how would they eat? **The teachers suggested to the children that they should illustrate their worlds.** Each child began to draw his or her vision, with ideas and comments, insights and funny observations, passing around the work space.

**The entire experience with the puddle led the teachers to**

**plan an exploration of the school neighborhood on a sunny and a rainy day to see how things would look different. To record children’s perceptions, teachers took photographs of things that children found interesting.** Later the sunny and rainy situations were compared by examining the photographs, and children drew people, houses, and bicycles in different weather. They used wax paper and ink for their rainy day pictures and colored paper and markers for sunny days.

The curiosity of the children led them to ask where the water goes after a rainstorm. **The teachers then helped the children to find out about the underground of city streets.** Next the sound of rain became something to explore. The problem became to visually represent the different sounds of a light versus a heavy rain. (Gandini and Edwards, 1988, pp. 16-17.)

This approach to projects was developed by Italian educators in the city of Reggio Emilia, as described in *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (edited by Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Reggio Emilia is a city of 130,000 in prosperous northern Italy. Its early childhood system is considered to be one of the premier programs in Europe; it originated after World War II in preschools started by parents. The city now runs 20 full-day educational child care centers for children ages three to six years as well as 12 centers for children under three years. Children of all socioeconomic backgrounds, including children with disabilities, attend. Parent fees are

low and the city subsidizes the centers (Gandini, 1992; New, 1990; Rosen, 1992).

Teachers in Reggio believe that the learning process involves creative exploration and problem-solving at the same time. Some key features of their approach include:

- the achievement of highest quality in a public child care system;
- the successful partnership of parents, educators, and public citizens in the management of the schools, along with the methods of teaming and information-sharing among more experienced and less experienced teachers;
- an integrated curriculum based on listening to children and long-term projects. The projects address big, rich, interesting problems and are not rigorously time-bound, but instead are expected to extend over time — days and weeks, perhaps months — and to open new aspects of the topic that had not been predicted initially. The projects are emergent; that is, planning is present but projects develop as they go;
- emphasis on collaborative learning, communication, and group problem-solving among children and adults, with the result that children engage one another and progress toward unexpectedly high levels of performance;
- portfolio work, promoting revisiting and revising by children, and involving various ways of thinking through problems and various ways of representing them (for instance, drawings, paintings, words);
- carefully-arranged environments: pleasant and welcoming, that provide space and materials for extended exploration, a mix of natural objects, household objects used in various ways, art and construction materials, and significant objects brought from home;
- displays throughout the school that document completed and ongoing projects through photographs of the children at work, selected texts of their conversations, and examples of what they made. These serve

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as a memory of the projects for children, parents, and teachers.

We believe the Reggio experience, though not directly transferable to the United States, has ideas to offer us that are provocative and that fit well with our own thinking here about teaching and learning. In fact, much of the Reggio philosophy was influenced by American progressive educators, especially John Dewey and David Hawkins (Malaguzzi, 1993).

### The learning environment for project work

#### *Many languages for communication and expression*

The learning environment is the place where children and adults meet to jointly go on an adventure of learning and discovering. Traveling together requires talking together and thus teachers and children must share the same language — but need they be limited to just one? Children, of course, usually speak just one or two languages, if we only consider English, Spanish, Japanese, and the like. But what if we think metaphorically about all the ways that children can form images, represent thoughts and desires, and communicate with the world around them? Young children need the possibility to express themselves in many formats with many materials — words, drawings, paintings, collage, sculpture, shadow play, construction, computers, music, drama, and movement, to name a few. Certainly they need to develop their skills in communicating through words, but they are also eager to explore other avenues and channels, too. Then they may become more confident, determined, and creative in their learning,

and we believe that they also move easily toward the more abstract and symbol-based academic work of middle childhood.

#### *Time for reflection and investigation*

Project work takes *time*; it is not something to be done in one day or according to a predetermined schedule. For example, when engaged in the puddle project described above, the class physically explored the puddle by stamping about in their boots, studied their reflections in the water through observation and photographs, represented the puddle in drawings, fantasized about “puddle words,” investigated the city sewer system, and on and on. The teacher’s goal was *not* to speed these activities along or to do as many activities as possible, but to let each one be explored in genuine depth according to the interests of the children, in a leisurely way that allowed new ideas and associations (like the idea of an “upside down world”) to bubble up freely. Such an approach requires large blocks of time within the daily schedule, as well as more flexible beginnings and endings of work times.

#### *Space that supports project work*

Project work also requires a certain attitude toward *space*. In Reggio Emilia, each school for three- to six-year-olds has a special studio or workshop dedicated to project work, used by all of the school and richly equipped with art supplies, natural and found materials, and cast-off items salvaged for new use, all carefully and aesthetically arranged (with the children’s help) on accessible, open shelves. While most United States schools are not presently designed to allow such a luxurious resource for project work, nevertheless creative teachers can usually find ways to carve sub-divided spaces out of existing classrooms or storage areas. It is important that the children can preserve and build upon their work from one day or week to the next.

It is also important that space be available for some project work in small subgroups. Teachers are used to providing for whole-class activities and for individual activities, but may not know how to take advantage of small groups for in-depth investigations in the way that the Reggio educators have spent many years refining. In Reggio Emilia, each year every child has at least one opportunity to work at the center of a project group. Teachers have found that project discussions and construction can take

place best when just three to six children work together. Children benefit from a place to work in a concentrated and relatively protected way, perhaps behind a screen, bookshelf, or curtain if not in a separate room or alcove, in the same way that we adults sometimes like to retreat to work together in a study or conference room where we can leave our work out until finished.

#### *Documentation as “memory” for children and adults*

Yet a third way to use space to support project work is through *documentation* (Gandini, 1991, 1993) consisting of display panels, slide presentations, videotapes, or booklets of any kind that inform families, welcome children to a community of learners, and highlight and summarize children’s project experiences — their words and conversations, the activities they undertake, the works they create. The documentary records become displays for school entryways and classroom walls and are used in conferences and discussions with children, parents, and other adults. Documentation has many parallels to American ideas of the learning portfolio and authentic assessment, except that for project work, documentation often summarizes the experience of a whole group rather than an individual. It samples the children’s most thoughtful, effortful, and significant projects and moments; highlights their choices, directions, and progress made; and summarizes for all involved and for outside audiences what the group and individuals have learned and discovered and of what they are capable.

The idea to make documentation a centerpiece of their educational approach arose early in the history of the Reggio Emilia schools, when Loris Malaguzzi had the wonderful insight that in order to raise parents’ expectations of the educational system, it was necessary to introduce them to a higher quality of knowing about their children’s learning (Malaguzzi, 1993). Displaying children’s work (drawings, paintings, constructions, and so on) *by itself* in the usual ways would not be enough; rather it would be necessary to accompany examples of the children’s work with transcripts of their words and photographs identifying key moments of the processes that led up to their creations. The Reggio Emilia teachers soon discovered that through documentation, they themselves could best understand and support children’s exploration, thinking, and learning; they could see what they had done

### CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

Carolyn P. Edwards and Kay Springate describe here the atmosphere and relationships which permit emergent curriculum and child-initiated, teacher-supported projects. We invite our readers to submit articles describing actual projects of this type to *Dimensions of Early Childhood* for possible publication in future issues. Ideally, submissions will include photographs, work samples, and other artifacts of the projects.

Send four copies of manuscripts to Editor, *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, P.O. Box 56130, Little Rock, AR, 72215-6130.

with children and share it with colleagues. Thus, documentation succeeds on three levels at once when it:

1. informs parents and community and enlists their involvement;
2. promotes professional development and exchange of ideas; and
3. gives children a sense of belonging, confidence to take part, and better understanding of what they and other children have thought and done (Gandini, in progress).

### The role of the teacher

#### Setting the stage

Beginning a project is one of the points of most concern to teachers (Gandini and Edwards, 1988). If the goal is to start from the interests and ideas of the children, how do teachers prepare and initiate group activity? How do teachers find a way to combine the interests of the children with their own interests and with the curriculum directions they believe the children need, or which fit the larger objectives of the school, community, or state?

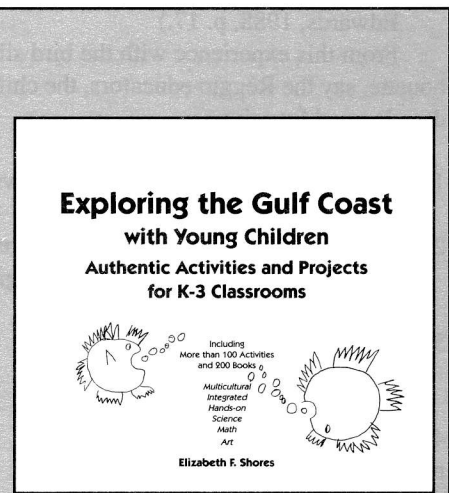
*Listening and observing.* The starting point should always be the words, questions, actions, and interests of the group of children (Edwards, 1993). For a period of time before beginning project work, the teacher can use opportunities provided by independent choice time, meals, and outdoor play to listen to children and take notes on a small notepad; perhaps a tape recorder in the dramatic play or block area can serve as a useful tool, too. The teacher can also ask stimulating questions that may arouse genuine curiosity among the children (Forman, 1989), and the teacher can take notes on aspects of the topic that seem to excite, surprise, and motivate the children's conversation and curiosity. Then, reviewing all of these notes, the teacher can ponder which of the many possible directions that have been suggested might be best to follow.

*Teacher collaboration.* Just as children benefit from others in constructing their knowledge, so, too, the teacher needs a partner in initiating and facilitating project work. The teacher needs someone with whom to review notes and consider day-to-day decisions about what to do next in working with the children. An *emergent* curriculum (Rankin, 1993; Rinaldi, 1993) depends on

collaboration. If a co-teacher or supervisor is not available, perhaps an assistant teacher, teacher's aide, parent, student teacher, or community member would like to join the teacher for a specific project.

*Initiating the project.* Instead of coming in one morning and announcing, "Children, today we are starting a project on \_\_\_\_\_," the teacher may find a way to stimulate the children to feel that they are at the start of discovering something. This involves structuring a provocation that surprises or delights and arouses questions and conversation in the group. A provocation might involve a change in the classroom environment, an intriguing event, or an interesting discussion. In the example below, notice how the teacher subtly initiates a project on shadows and provokes the children's thinking without giving answers.

One sunny day, as the children were going outside to play, a three-year-old boy observed that on the hallway floor was a little bird (in fact, unknown to him, it was **the shadow of a bird silhouette, pasted onto the window by the teacher**). Later when the children were returning inside, the same boy was surprised to see that the bird had moved to a different spot on the floor. He called out to his friends, but they teased him, "The bird is not real," "It could not move." **The teacher suggested that the boy trace the bird with chalk.** He did, and all of the children went in for snack. Afterwards they returned to discover that the bird had moved again! The excited children tried to hold down the bird with their hands. One child suggested putting the bird in a cage, so they drew a cage with chalk and, feeling satisfied that the bird would now stay, they went off to play. Later one child came back to check and found the bird escaping from its cage. While the children were debating what to do next, one noticed the window with the paper bird pasted on and the sun shining through the pane around it: "It is the sun that comes and goes away and moves the bird on the floor!" **This experience served as the springboard for many later activities.** (Gandini and



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Edwards, 1988, p. 17.)

From this experience with the bird silhouette, say the Reggio educators, the children learned four things:

1. that it is necessary to have one's own words and views about things;
2. that understanding something often requires making a change in one's original opinion;
3. that such changes often take place through communicating with others;
4. that change involves all sorts of movement by the person — physical actions, changes in feelings, raising of ideas to a new level, and new relationships with things and other people (“100 Languages of Children” Exhibit, Shadow Project, “Four Rules for a Good Discussion.”)

*Bringing in parents.* As the project gets going and children become involved, they will go home and talk about what is happening. This is a good moment to send a letter home or, better yet, invite the parents to a meeting. Excitement is contagious and many parents will be drawn by their children's enthusiasm into wanting to contribute in some way. Parents, too, can participate with ideas, resources, and energy to add (Gandini, 1992; LeeKeenan and Edwards, 1992).

### **Sustaining the project:**

#### **Connecting one day to the next**

Once a project is underway, a teacher can use many of the strategies discussed so far to connect one day to the next (Edwards, 1993; Rankin, 1993). For example, the teacher can help the children pick up where they left off by reading them sample comments from a previous discussion, or by looking with them at documentation such as photographs, videotape, or examples of the children's earlier work. Instead of announcing, “Children, our next activity will be \_\_\_\_\_,” she can post the children's comments and questions on a bulletin board, review them in terms of their learning potential, and then suggest, for instance, “Elinor asked about where the rainwater goes when it disappears into the ground. Would you like to find out about that?” As experiences accumulate, children can help select photographs and text to be used in a documentary album or display.

How does the teacher know when the children have exhausted a project? Some-

times a project will end quickly because it has not successfully engaged the group (for an example, see LeeKeenan and Nimmo, 1993, p. 257). Perhaps it was not sufficiently interesting, relevant, or connected to the children's world. Perhaps it was not intellectually and emotionally rich enough — dense in potential meanings — to offer enough possibilities for sustained and long-term interest. Perhaps the children had not yet had



sufficient time to form the peer relationships to sustain collaborative work.

The common tendency, however, is for premature closure. Teachers worry that children have lost interest and run out of ideas, and so they allow them to discontinue their work. Instead, by trusting that the children have more to offer and that their restlessness is temporary and insignificant, the teacher can help the child cycle back into renewed interest (Gambetti, 1993; Tarini, 1993).

#### **Summarizing and concluding the project**

Teachers will want to conclude the project in a way that heightens and summarizes for the children what they have learned, helps them communicate to classmates and parents, and provides the whole experience with a satisfying sense of closure. The teachers need to consider what the children have learned and accomplished and also what they themselves have learned and accomplished. Culminating experiences can include the sharing of a creative product (such as a play, or the life-size dinosaur described by Rankin, 1992, 1993), or a special collective outing, or a festive meal with parents present. In Reggio Emilia, children like to invite town officials or other people who have been generous with them or their school.

#### **Bridging the children and school to the community**

Besides serving learning goals, projects can also be a splendid way to serve the social goal of bringing children to know more

about their particular cultures: *to participate in their near community, the world of the adults in their own immediate world.* This is a good stepping stone toward eventually becoming citizens of the wider world.

For example, let us suppose kindergarten children in a Florida classroom are heard arguing about brown pelicans, how long they live and how many eggs they lay. After talking with the children and finding out what they know about pelicans and what intrigues them, the teacher could map out in his mind a variety of activities that might be pursued as the children investigate the subject (Shores, 1993). A trip to Pelican Island, a National Wildlife Refuge, might be an initiating activity, with the emphasis on observing, experiencing, feeling, and questioning, rather than listening to explanatory lectures by adults. While at the refuge, the children could draw pictures, take photographs, tape-record pelican noises, and just play. The teacher might be surprised at the content or level of the questions that the children bring back and become excited with them in finding out the answers. If only a part of the class remains interested after the field trip, then they can become the core of the investigation team for this project, and share their feelings and creative products with the others.

In Reggio Emilia, a field trip every fall takes the preschool children out to the countryside to participate in the grape harvest. This is one of the most ancient events of the Emilia Romagna region and represents the livelihood of the farmers. The principle of *continuity within change* (a culture both ancient and modern) is made concrete and accessible to the children. As illustrated in the theme, “Harvesting Grapes with the Farmers,” of the 100 Languages of Children exhibit, the project consisted of several experiences. A farm family (who had a longstanding relationship with this particular school) visited and showed the children many of the tools used in harvesting and processing grapes. The children, in turn, journeyed to the farm and exuberantly explored the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of the land and the buildings; felt, smelled, picked, sorted, and trampled the grapes; worked together to carry heavy baskets; and sat

**See “Projects” on page 40**

# Projects

Continued from page 12

contemplatively in the orchard drawing the vines. Finally, on yet another day, the farm family returned to the school for a culminating celebration, and all enjoyed the grape juice and sense of accomplishment they had gained from working together in a time-honored manner that made real the interdependency of city and countryside and of the generations, young and old.

Besides immersing children in their own local heritage, such projects expand support networks for teachers. Other members of the community become resource persons and experts. Teachers can learn about the community and create personal contacts that may be useful on future occasions. In a reciprocal way, the community also gains closeness to the school and a chance to better understand its children and the educational process.

## Thinking imaginatively about project themes

Once teachers give themselves and the children permission to let the curriculum "emerge," a world of possibilities opens. For example, suppose a teacher has heard her five-year-old children talking animatedly about weddings and who is going to marry whom. Rather than ignore this interest, she could decide to follow it and see if it offers learning potential. For example, she could bring in magazines showing weddings and get the children to discuss what they know about weddings. They might become engrossed in costumes, rituals, food, music, or people involved in weddings, all of which might offer a legitimate starting point for an in-depth investigation fulfilling some of the teacher's long-term curriculum goals for the year. Children might want to visit a local bakery and then reconstruct some of the equipment they saw and decorate elaborate cakes. They might want to plan and make a wedding veil, dress, and bouquet. They might visit and then map a church or temple and the route the marriage party would take. They could compare kinds of wedding costumes and their prices, write and decorate beautiful invitations, plan seating for everyone in the church or temple, learn about how their parents and grandparents were married and make a photo display with text, or learn about marriage laws in their state and what marriage licenses look like and say. Not all

of these things need be done by the entire class; rather, small groups can do one or a few of these things with as much leisure and depth as possible and with constant revising and revisiting what has been done along the way. The project can be satisfying to the children, teachers, and parents and take all of them on an intellectual adventure they were not quite expecting!

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