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Ch. 5, "The Environment as
Third Teacher".

Chapter 5



Cormorant

The Environment as Third Teacher

The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences.

—Loris Malaguzzi

Questions to Consider:

- What is the rationale for creating an environment that acts as a third teacher?
- What are the major similarities and differences in the way the environment is planned in Reggio Emilia schools and in typical North American preschools?
- What are the key principles that need to be considered in creating an environment that acts as a third teacher?
- What are the challenges in creating and working in this kind of environment?
- How does the creation of an environment that acts as a third teacher affect the quality of programming in an early childhood centre?

The space we live in has a powerful influence over us, particularly the space we grew up in. Often we try, without even being aware of it, to recreate in our adult lives the places we remember from our childhood. Long ago, for instance, the immigrants from Europe brought the images of the gardens they had played in as children to their new homeland, where they recreated the rose gardens and flower borders filled with European flowers such as delphiniums and foxgloves.

When teachers plan an environment where children will spend long periods of time, they need to think of the effect this environment may have on their adult lives. Carol Anne Wien, on a study trip to Reggio Emilia in 1997, met some graduates of the Reggio Emilia preschools and noted in her diary that what they remembered about their time there was a particular atmosphere of deep affection, a feeling of family, lasting friendships, images of light and colour, and strong relationships with teachers. Alexis, a student of literature at the University of Parma and head of a theatre group, told Wien, "It gave me a particular

sensibility to face the world" (1997). Wien also quotes Francesco, an atelierista in one of the Reggio Emilia preschools, as saying that "one young man of 23 told her that whenever he feels stressed or upset he takes a walk by his old school and remembers the joy he experienced while there."

The spaces that teachers create for children seem to hold enduring memories for them that have a powerful influence on what they will value later in life. It is important, therefore, that teachers think carefully about their own values and how they affect the decisions they make about the arrangement of space, equipment, and materials in the classroom. Teachers are often unaware of the messages the environment is communicating to children and visitors to the classroom. I remember one year, when psychedelic colours were in fashion, we painted all the children's cubbies in bright, clashing colours. It took us a long time to realize why the children had become so excitable when they were putting on their clothes to go outside.

When I visit a preschool or kindergarten I know immediately upon walking into the classroom and seeing the children's work displayed on the walls a great deal about the philosophy of the school. On one of my visits to the Quadra Island Preschool, I was stunned by the beauty of a multicoloured sheet draped beside the entranceway. Pinned to the sheet were photographs, written comments, and a description of how the parents, children, and teacher had coloured the fabric. They had used eye droppers to squirt food colouring on to the fabric to make a "dragon skin" for the Chinese New Year's parade. I was able to read the "story" of the sheet from the documentation pinned to the fabric. However, I also learned much more, such as how much collaboration among children, parents, and teachers was valued in this preschool. I understood from looking at the beautiful artwork that aesthetics were highly valued. I could see that respect was being shown for children and families from different cultural groups.

One can understand why the educators in Reggio Emilia have termed the environment a third teacher because of the power environments such as these have to inform and shape the kind of learning that will happen in the room. As Lella Gandini wrote,

The schools in Reggio Emilia could not be just anywhere, and no one of them could serve as an exact model to be copied literally elsewhere.

Yet, they have common features that merit consideration in schools everywhere. Each school's particular configuration of the garden, walls, tall windows, and handsome furniture declares: This is a place where adults have thought about the quality of environment. Each school is full of light, variety, and a certain kind of joy. In addition, each school shows how teachers, parents, and children, working and

playing together, have created a unique space that reflects their personal lives, the history of their schools, the many layers of culture and a nexus of well thought out choices. (in Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1993, 149)

The Quadra Island Preschool, too, began to develop a unique space that reflected the lives of the people involved and the culture of the community it served.

THE ENVIRONMENT AS A REFLECTION OF VALUES

Visitors to the schools in Reggio Emilia are amazed at the care and attention that have been given to the preparation of the environment. It would take a long time, if it were even possible, to become aware of all the details and to comprehend the thinking that has gone into every aspect of the space in the schools in Reggio Emilia. Details have been carefully thought through so that the environment truly reflects the values and beliefs that have evolved in the schools over the last 50 years.

Respect for the image of the child as rich, strong, and powerful is fundamental in preparing an environment that allows the child to be actively engaged in the process of learning. The importance given to building relationships with children, families, and the community means that learning is viewed as a collaborative process that does not take place in isolation. Spaces, therefore, are designed to welcome families and other visitors. Furniture is placed in the entrance halls to make parents and other visitors feel comfortable and to encourage them to take the time to inform themselves about the school. The documentation displayed on the walls or in portfolios on the shelves in the entranceways provides a record of what has been happening in the program. The space in the classrooms is designed to encourage children to work with others, sometimes in a large group but more often in small groups of four or five children. There are low platforms built above the floor, where a small group of children can work on a project, such as building with blocks, undisturbed by the activity in the rest of the room. Mini-ateliers provide an area adjacent to the main classroom where children can work separately with art and construction materials.

Consideration of aesthetics is evident in every aspect of the program. The thought that goes into creating beautiful spaces for children reflects the belief that children deserve the very best and that their aesthetic sense needs to be nurtured in the early years. As Carol Anne Wien wrote in 1997 in her diary of her visit to Reggio Emilia, "the beauty, serenity and deep affection in the

schools stays with the children as a foundation," perhaps throughout their lives. Loris Malaguzzi envisioned Reggio Emilia classrooms as being "transformed into one large space with market stalls, each one with its own children and its own projects and activities" (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1993, 84). This layout has similarities with the way many early childhood programs organize their space. In most preschools and child cares in North America, certain areas of the room are designated as places where children can do specific activities, such as creating artwork, building with blocks, and working with puzzles and other table toys. There is an area, usually called a housekeeping or dramatic play area, where children can use props for role play. The traditional curriculum areas, such as music, literature, art, and science, each have their own area of the room where children can use the materials for each aspect of the curriculum. The library corner, for instance, is stocked with books, which may reflect the current topics the children are exploring. On closer inspection, however, a visitor notices that there are subtle differences in the way environments are planned in traditional and Reggio Emilia schools.

Creating an environment that acts as a third teacher supports the perspective that knowledge is constructed not in isolation but within the social group. Teachers embracing the Reggio Emilia approach, therefore, have to think differently about the way they plan the environment. It needs to be designed to provide opportunities for the people involved to interact with one another and with the environment to co-construct knowledge. Lella Gandini quotes Loris Malaguzzi:

We value space because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning. All of this contributes to a sense of well-being and security in children. We also think that the space has to be a sort of aquarium that mirrors the ideas; values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it. (1994, 149)

Loris Malaguzzi acknowledged the role the environment plays in the education of young children and its power to communicate beyond the classroom walls. In fact, he tells the story of how in the early days when the schools were struggling for their existence, once a week the children and teachers set up their equipment in the centre of town so people could see the school in action. The municipal schools in Reggio Emilia have understood the power of the environment and put it to work in programs involving young

children, parents, and the community perhaps more effectively than in any other kind of school. As Gandini describes it, "The environment is seen here as educating the child; in fact it is considered as 'the third educator' along with a team of two teachers" (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1993, 148).

Identifying Shared Values

To plan an environment like that of the preschools in Reggio Emilia, which so closely reflects the philosophy and values of the families, teachers, and community involved, is a challenging task. As in all aspects of the approach, teachers have to begin with small steps and then build on these as they feel more confident. The first step, therefore, in planning the environment is to identify the values that are at the core of our work with young children and those of the families and the wider community surrounding the school. This means that teachers, in the early stages of planning, arrange meetings with all the people involved in their programs to clarify the values that are important to the group.

This task sounds easy, but when the abstract values that the group has identified are translated into concrete factors, such as the selection of materials and equipment and the programming of each day, the task gets harder. The team may struggle with such questions as what materials, equipment, and routines are congruent with the identified values. For instance, if authenticity is identified as a core value, this will affect the choice of materials set out for dramatic play. Is it congruent with the stated value to provide the children with plastic models of food and utensils, or should real objects be set out in the play kitchen? In the art area, should play dough be used as a modelling material, or is clay a more authentic artistic material? These are the decisions the group will have to make to ensure their program truly reflects their values. As stated above, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the programs in the preschools in Reggio Emilia is the way practice reflects the beliefs and values of the community. Collaboration, for instance, is highly valued and is seen in operation from the highest level of community-based management of the schools, to the partnership in learning between children and teachers in the classroom.

Teachers wishing to explore the Reggio Emilia approach may find it helps to begin the process of planning an environment that acts as a third teacher by thinking of their own values. Once they have done this individually, they can share their values with the team and members of the community. When the teachers in the child care on Quadra Island decided to reorganize their environment to make it reflect more closely the principles learned from

Reggio Emilia, they began by identifying the values that were important to them. The teachers met once a week in the evening and made a list of ideas they valued and felt passionate about. They then reworked the list, until the whole group shared ownership of it. These are some of the values the group listed on a chart: aesthetics, light, coziness, comfort, tidiness, organized space, softness, safety, challenges, open spaces, and clutter-free space. On a separate chart they listed their passions. These included children, music, plants, solitude, travel, food, reading, learning, exploring, nature, animals, laughter, outdoors, arts, dressups, building, and designing landscapes.

The teachers then began to examine the space in their environment to see what needed to be changed to reflect the things that they had identified as important to the group. As they had identified aesthetics as a central value, they looked at every corner of the classroom to see whether it met the criteria for this value. They decided that the heaps of puzzles and games on the shelves in the classroom would have to be stored in a less conspicuous place. These items were replaced with a display of branches and driftwood collected with the children in the forest and arranged attractively in flat dishes on the shelves. An interesting assortment of shells were placed in glass jars and filled with water of different colours. The children were invited to bring in objects that



Quadra Island Children's Centre shelves before introducing the Reggio Emilia principles



Quadra Island Children's Centre shelves after introducing the Reggio Emilia principles

they were excited about to display on the shelves. Very soon, a dull, uninteresting space became a focus of attention in the room.

Light was also considered an important value, so the group examined the environment to see how it could be used to further advantage. They moved a refrigerator away from a window and replaced it with a painting easel. There was now space and light for a plant to be placed on the windowsill beside the easel.

A beautiful, quiet place was created where children could spend long periods of time painting.

The environment demonstrates respect for the children and their ideas in many ways. For instance, the teachers asked the children to help plan the housekeeping corner. A child-sized bed with a soft mattress was built at the



The staff at the Quadra Island Children's Centre moved a refrigerator away from the window and replaced it with an easel.

children's request. The bed also addressed qualities of softness, comfort, and coziness that the group felt should be present in their setting. As well, the art area in the classroom was reorganized to form a mini-atelier. Whereas in the past all the art materials had been set out haphazardly on the shelves, they were now carefully selected and displayed aesthetically in attractive containers. Documentation of the children's work was displayed on the walls to celebrate the children's ideas and to make their thinking visible.

The teachers kept asking themselves the following questions as they began to reorganize the classroom space to reflect first their own values and passions, and second the principles they had learned from Reggio Emilia.

- How well does the room reflect the values we have identified as important to us?
- What overall messages will the room convey to children, parents, and other visitors to the classroom?
- How will the environment mirror an image of the child that is rich, powerful, and competent?
- How well does the arrangement of the room reflect our respect for children, families, and the community?
- Does the environment offer experiences that heighten multisensory awareness?

The search for answers to these questions led the teachers to gradually reevaluate their use of space in the classroom and make profound changes in the physical space, the decoration of the rooms, and the availability of materials. They began to include the parents and the community in their discussions. At one well-attended meeting of parents and community members, the staff asked for specific suggestions about how they could make the space more welcoming to families and other visitors. The parents told the staff how much they valued the documentation in the entrance and how it was "drawing them more into the program." They suggested that a special place be created in the entrance hall where the staff could jot down things that needed to be done (small or big) so parents would know how they could help and volunteer if they had the time and the skill.

EXPLORING REGGIO EMILIA PRINCIPLES

A number of principles, including aesthetics, active learning, collaboration, transparency, "bringing the outdoors in," flexibility, relationship, and reci-

procity, need to be addressed to create an environment that acts as a third teacher. Although these principles are discussed separately here, it is important to keep in mind their interconnectedness.

Aesthetics

Louise Cadwell describes the way Amelia Gambetti worked with the teachers in the College School in St. Louis, Missouri, to improve the aesthetics in the environment and how they "transformed our classrooms from dark, dismal places into beautiful, inviting, light-filled, orderly spaces" (1997, 61). She describes Amelia looking at a mural of a tree in the entryway to the school:

"Let's give this tree more of a reason for being," said Amelia. "What about moving that flight cage of finches that is in the hall in here in front of it. That could solve several problems ... it would give the tree a purpose—a backdrop for the birds; it would make the birds feel closer to the out-of-doors near the colors and image of a tree." (1997, 99–100)

After reading this passage, I summoned the courage to suggest to Baerbel Jaeckel, the teacher at Quadra Island Preschool, that we approach the parents about removing a mural that had been painted some years before on one wall that ran the length of the preschool. This cartoon of an enormous, smiling sun frolicking with small children dominated the room. It smothered the children's "voices" and took up space that we could use for documentation. To my relief, the parents agreed. One parent said, "the mural has outlived its time; it came from another era." Over the holidays they arranged to have the wall painted a warm off-white. It is now an area where the children can see their work displayed and where parents and visitors can read the documentations of the children's experiences in the room. It feels as if the *real* children and their voices are now being heard in the room.

Active Learning

This principle reflects the underlying value of respect for the child, particularly for the image of the child as competent and able to construct her learning either alone or with the support of others. The principle of active learning requires that the classroom have a stimulating environment that offers children many choices, provokes them to engage in many activities, and encourages them to explore a wide variety of materials. These materials need to be open ended to allow the children to act on and transform them in many ways. There also should be many opportunities for children to represent their ideas in different media.



The Quadra Island Preschool classroom before the centre introduced Reggio Emilia principles

The classroom at the Vancouver Child Study Centre provides children with a rich and stimulating learning environment. In the fall, the teachers had observed that the children in their group that year were very interested in construction. Over the next few weeks, in addition to the blocks, Lego, and Duplo regularly available in the classroom, the teachers provided the children with many different kinds of blocks to build with: small, brightly coloured wooden blocks of various shapes and sizes, mosaic tiles, and so on. They also brought in carpentry tools and high-quality wood for the children to hammer and nail. The teachers encouraged the children to create many drawings, paintings, collages, and three-dimensional objects representing their ideas about construction. As well, the teachers brought in a selection of books about building.

One group was particularly interested in the story "The Three Little Pigs," so the teachers decided to ask the children if they would like to build houses for the pigs. The children sketched how they imagined the houses might look. They decided to use cardboard boxes as a base for the houses. The children took a walk in the forest behind the school to collect materials to build the houses. A small group of children formed a core group who stayed with the

Godfrey's wolf



Godfrey drew the wolf from "The Three Little Pigs."

project for the whole time, while many of the other children came and went during the three weeks that the project lasted. The children made the first two houses by attaching straw and sticks, which they had collected in the forest, to the wooden boxes with "mortar" they had made with flour and water. The children experimented with food colouring and paint to make the glue they had mixed look more like mortar. Then came the more challenging job of constructing the house made of bricks. The teachers put the cardboard box on the table. One surface of the box had been shaped to form the roof, and they cut a door and a window out of the sides. The teachers showed the children a real brick and discussed how the pigs would have used bricks like this one to build their houses. They set a large block of red clay out on the table and helped the children cut the clay into small, square bricks. The children began to build the bricks up the side of the house to make the walls.

Sally



First Little Pig's house

Sally drew the straw house for the first little pig.



William announces that he is making a "brick house."

Gloria (the teacher): It looks as though it is going to be strong. If it isn't the right size you need to make it yourself. Which size do you need?

William (age 4): Fat and little ones.

Gloria: What is that coming out of the top of the roof?

William: The chimney. We are making a brick house.

Gloria: Look at the heavy, heavy brick here.

William: I have made one [brick]. I need a paintbrush.

(He begins to use the paintbrush to apply "mortar" to cement the bricks he has made.)

William: I am making a brick house, but it is clay, but when the clay dries it will be brick. The water makes it stick good. It is almost going to be a brick house. How does the door close? How does it stay closed? You can close it if it is almost going to dry. If it is starting to be hard it won't open.

(He cuts some more square bricks. He measures the size of brick he needs and fits the one he made into the space. It doesn't quite fit. He tries cutting the brick with scissors.)

William: A strongman tool. We need a skinny brick for that corner.

Gloria: Godfrey, can you help us on this corner? Which house is the strongest?

William: Look it is strong. I can't blow it down.

Gloria: But what if a wolf came along?

William: That is strong paper. It is called cardboard. Special little bricks. That is a middle-sized brick.

Gloria: It looks pretty strong.

(William calls out to two children who are pounding the clay bricks into a mound: "You have to make a brick house!" He goes over and joins them at the clay table.)

This example shows how the experience of constructing a brick house provided the child with many opportunities to actively explore, investigate, and solve problems with the support of Gloria, his teacher. She stayed with him until he put the finishing touches to the house. The transcription gives an insight into how Gloria supported William's thinking process as he estimated the size of the bricks he needed and considered the properties of the clay. He made choices about tools and decided the scissors would be a better tool for cutting the clay than the knife the teacher had suggested. He thought about the strength of the house ("I can't blow it down"). He tried to keep the other children on task, saying, "You *have* to make a brick house." Gloria gave him the freedom to use the material in another way when he decided to join the children exploring the red clay at the next table.

By the time the three little pigs' houses were nearly complete, only William was left working on the house, and he too seemed to be losing interest. Was there any point in bringing out the brick house the next day? The teachers discussed this and decided to bring the project to a close. They put the three houses the children had made for the little pigs on a low shelf below a display board with many drawings, photographs, and written commentaries that documented the experience. The teachers, remembering the way the children had used the clay to make a volcano the day before, won-

dered if the children were really interested in pursuing this topic further. They had observed that the red clay had made the children think of hot lava. The next day they put out the clay again and observed what the children did with it. The children stated that they wanted the volcano they had made the previous day to explode. The teachers and the children set about figuring how they could make this happen. A small group of children carried on this investigation about volcanic explosions for the next few days.

An environment such as this, which stimulates learning and is responsive to the children's input, is essential to creating an environment that acts as a third teacher. As Lella Gandini states,

In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible: It must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up to date and responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge. All the things that surround the people in the school and which they use—the objects, the materials, and the structures—are not seen as passive elements but on the contrary are seen as elements that condition and are conditioned by the actions of children and adults who are active in it. (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1993, 148)

Collaboration

Collaboration is one of the strongest messages that the environment in its role as the third teacher communicates. An environment planned to act as a third teacher is particularly effective in helping children learn skills for working with others in a group. The approach, for instance, requires that teachers encourage children to contribute their ideas and efforts to group projects. Children learn the value of individual contributions in building the strength of the group. The environment must allow space for working individually or with other children and adults in groups. As Vygotsky says, "With assistance every child can do more than he can by himself—though only within the limits set by the



Emma shows us how to use chopsticks.



Children paint the skin of the dragon.

state of his development" (1962, 103). The large murals, for instance, that are painted on acetate and hung from the ceilings in the Reggio Emilia schools are created in collaboration with others.

In Quadra Island Preschool, the teacher, parents, and children collaborated in celebrating the Chinese New Year. One of the children in the preschool, Emma, had been adopted as an infant and brought from China to live on Quadra Island. Her parents are determined that she retains her cultural heritage; thus, the celebration of the Chinese New Year became a particularly important celebration for the preschool. Emma's mother shared many of the beautiful objects that she had brought back with her from her trip to China to adopt Emma. A beautiful display was arranged in front of a magnificent wall hanging of a fiery gold dragon. The parents and the teacher discussed how they could construct a dragon for the Chinese New Year's parade. One of the fathers offered to help the children build the dragon's head out of a



Des and his mother do calligraphy together.



The dragon dances to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

cardboard box. The teacher helped the children make the dragon's "skin," using a sheet and food colouring. Parents made many contributions—for instance, one mother cooked Chinese food with the children for snack time, and another showed the children how to do calligraphy. The children also made red money envelopes and lanterns to decorate the room.

At last the day of the parade came. When the parents arrived, the preschool was empty; there was not a sound. The children had decided that the dragon should hide very quietly until everyone had arrived. They all huddled in a back room in total silence under the dragon skin, in line behind the child who had volunteered to be under the dragon's head. The parents stood around looking puzzled, until suddenly there was a loud boom from a gong and out tumbled the most magnificent dragon anyone had ever seen. He paraded round and round the room, accompanied by the booming of the gong.

The richness of this experience resulted from the collaboration of everyone in the program. It could not have happened the way it did without the children, teacher, and parents all contributing their ideas and skills. It is essential, therefore, that in creating an environment that acts as a third teacher, children are given the opportunity to work with others in the construction of knowledge. The room should also communicate respect for the families and community, as well as for the cultural background of the people involved in the program and in the community served by the school.

Transparency

In the preschools in Reggio Emilia, transparency is evident at many levels in the program. On the surface, transparency is seen in the importance that light plays in the environment of every municipal preschool in Reggio Emilia. Light is everywhere; it not only shines through windows and internal glass walls,

but it is used in playful ways. It is captured and changed by coloured, transparent film attached to the windowpanes; it is caught on the shiny mobiles that break up the space between floor and ceilings, it shines through glass objects that reflect it around the room. Light is reflected in mirrors hung from the ceilings and on the classroom walls. Mirrors are found in unexpected places, such as attached to the floor and on the ramps for climbing. Mirrors are formed into pyramid-shaped kaleidoscopes into which children can climb and observe their reflections from many different angles. Light is used as an art medium; for instance, the children paint and arrange collage materials on the glass surface of light tables. The children's artwork is also projected onto walls by overhead projectors. Light shines through the murals that the children have painted on large plastic sheets, which may be hung from the ceilings as room dividers or displayed on the walls of the classrooms. A light source gives an added dimension to the construction area of the classroom. Children can use a light projector to cast shadows of their block constructions on a screen or wall of the classroom.

Transparency is also a metaphor for communication, especially in the documentation that informs parents and visitors of what is happening in the program. This information is made transparent, such as through the documentation of the children's work that is displayed in the entrances and on the classroom walls. On a deeper level, transparency is seen in the openness of the educators of Reggio Emilia to learning from the ideas of others working in the field of early childhood education and in their willingness to share their approach with visitors from all over the world.

Bringing the Outdoors In

Bringing the outdoors in heightens children's awareness of the natural, physical, and social environments in which they live. This awareness helps to strengthen the children's sense of belonging in their world. This principle, too, has levels of meaning. On the surface, the use of natural materials is seen in the decoration of the room. The teachers in Reggio Emilia added many natural materials to the activities in the room. For instance, there was a snake's skin wound around a piece of driftwood on one of the tables, and rocks, driftwood, and grapevines were available for the children to use with the blocks. On a deeper level, bringing the outdoors in connects children to their roots and gives them a sense of value and respect for their community and culture. The windows in the classroom should be low enough to allow children to watch the passing traffic and changes in the weather and the seasons. If the windows are too high for children to see out of, steps can be built below the



The Halloween witch made by the children and parents at Quadra Island Preschool.

window ledge so they can stand and look out.

In the Quadra Island Preschool, the teacher consulted the families of the children about plans for celebrating Halloween. A group decision was made to take a trip to the beach near the school and bring back a large piece of driftwood and materials from the beach, such as stringy seaweed and shells, to create a witch for Halloween. The children made a hat for the witch out of black construction paper and decorated it with grey-green lichen and feathers. They used long strands of seaweed to make her stringy hair. The children gave the witch many faces made out of natural materials, such as shells, bright red Japanese maple leaves, and fir cones. The parents designed a red velvet skirt for the witch to wear. She was the centre of the preschool's celebration of Halloween and developed such a strong personality that her fame spread around the island. Members of the local art gallery put her on display on Halloween night in their gallery, where she stayed in residence until mid-December. How proud the children and their families were to see their work displayed and appreciated by the community.

Flexibility

One of the joys of the Reggio Emilia approach is the spirit of creation that infuses all experiences. Everyone involved in the program is motivated by this extraordinary energy that becomes part of every experience. Old, tired practices disappear of their own accord, and everyone, to their surprise, discovers new and more interesting ways of doing things. Being flexible with space, time, and materials and in the way people relate to one another and their work is essential to making beneficial change happen.



Driftwood is used to make playground equipment at this child-care centre.

Teachers embracing the Reggio Emilia approach, therefore, have to think differently about the way they plan the environment. In particular, they need to plan for the flexible use of space and materials. Art and science materials, for instance, are no longer segregated in certain areas of the room but, rather, are available for use wherever they are needed, indoors or out. This is one of the reasons the schools in Reggio Emilia adopted the idea of the atelier as a place where children can work with materials from all areas of the curriculum, including art, literature, and science, to produce their ideas in collaboration with the atelierista. Participants in Reggio Emilia programs also have to be flexible and able to change their expectations of the preschool program. For example, the group of children in Quadra Island Preschool did not bring home the traditional jack-o'-lanterns made out of orange and black construction paper, as would have been expected every other year. The teacher and parents had to be flexible about how they planned to celebrate Halloween. The witch that the children, parents, teacher, and members of the community collaborated in making turned out to be a more aesthetically pleasing and meaningful experience than the traditional decorated witches and pumpkins that children made individually in other years.

Flexibility also often involves an unexpected use of materials and equipment. For instance, as the children in La Villetta school worked on the Amusement Park for Birds, they used material and equipment from all areas of the curriculum. They used books to find information about birds, they needed science equipment for building the fountains and windmills, and they employed art materials in decorating the objects created for the birds to enjoy. The children and teachers had many ideas for ways to use space. For instance, they built a bird blind to watch the birds in the playground. This was a completely unexpected object to find in a preschool setting.

Relationship

The emphasis the educators in the schools in Reggio Emilia place on relationship, which was discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, also affects the presentation of materials in the room. Objects are shown in relation to other materials. Lego blocks, for instance, may be laid out with pieces of driftwood on the surface of a mirror. This brings into relationship the artificial and natural worlds. It also gives children a different perspective when they see the construction they are building reflected upside down in the mirror. Clay for the children to work with is attractively laid out on a table with a flower

arrangement and examples of finished clay pieces displayed in the centre of the table. Collage materials are kept in clear plastic containers or spread out on trays for use. The abundant jars of brightly coloured paint, the aprons, and the paintbrushes are placed on a trolley beside the easel.

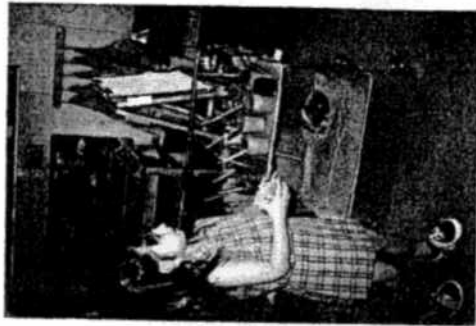
Relationship is also a key principle in the development of documentation. Documentation is designed to help the observer see the relationship between what the children are doing and the underlying theories and philosophical principles that provide the rationale for the experience.

Reciprocity

The notion of the environment acting as a third teacher gives the classroom the qualities of a living being. As such, it must be as open to change and responsive to the children, parents, and community as any good teacher would be. This reciprocal, dynamic environment is a powerful idea. It means that in adopting the Reggio Emilia approach teachers will have to think more critically about what kind of environment they provide for children. They will have to examine each element and think about its purpose.

One of the students, Melanie Price, wrote the following in her reflections on her participation in Children Teaching Teachers:

From the first CTT to the last, the experience and the knowledge I gained was immeasurable. I have learned that an environment needs to be the third teacher. By following the children's ideas and expanding on them, I was able to help create a curriculum that engaged the children's interests. By doing this it allowed them to expand their knowledge in social interactions, literacy, creativity, and dramatic play ... I also learned how to work in a group and how important it is to have a team that works well together for a common goal. By having this experience, I feel confident in my abilities to express my ideas freely, work as a team, and most importantly plan activities that will develop a child's "selves." Having a curriculum that empowers children will allow them to build self-esteem and confidence, as well as their social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and creative selves.



Paint jars are arranged on a trolley beside the easel at the Vancouver Child Study Centre.

SUPPORTING REGGIO EMILIA PRINCIPLES IN THE ENVIRONMENT

A strong focus in *Children Teaching Teachers* is to help students think carefully about the Reggio Emilia principles when they create environments for the children each week. Students are encouraged to think about how space can be designed to foster relationships—to provide gathering places for large groups and small groups and private spaces to retreat from the action. Space needs to be transformable, says Vea Vecchi (2001): "Children are nomads of the imagination and great manipulators of space: they love to construct, move and invent situations" (Vecchi, 2001). See Appendix 4 for a form teachers or students can use in planning classroom environments.

Michelle de Salaberry and Linda Murdoch, teachers in the preschool at Marpole Oakridge Community Centre, returned from Reggio Emilia in 2002 excited by the environments they had seen in the classrooms in Reggio Emilia. They teach in an average-sized room that has large windows and a glass door leading out onto a small balcony that overlooks expansive, grassy playing fields. Eighteen three-year-olds are enrolled in the morning class and 24 four-year-olds in the afternoon class. Each class attends for two-and-a-half hours.

Before their visit to Reggio Emilia, Michelle and Linda had begun to make changes to their environment. They had decided to "get rid of a lot of stuff, clear away the clutter, and create in the classroom a sense of peace and calm." However, it was hard to know what to keep and what to put away. They still wanted their room to reflect the cultures of the children, most of whom came from countries such as India, China, and Japan. Once they had cleared the room, they let Reggio Emilia inspire them in reorganizing the space. Aesthetics were a particularly important consideration in all areas of the classroom. In the dramatic play area, to soften the effect, they had draped transparent material from the ceiling and set a small table lamp on a shelf. They had also replaced the plastic dishes with china crockery and created a space to hang a few really special dress-up clothes. On the shelves lining the corner they arranged samples of the children's art work, indoor plants, a Japanese doll, and other ornaments the families had given the preschool over the years. Considering the importance of creating relational space, they had provided a small table and chairs and a bed large enough for two or three children to use at a time. On their return from Reggio Emilia in 2002, they wanted to add more natural materials to the classroom, so a branch from a tree was set up to mark the entrance to the dramatic play area and more indoor plants were placed on the shelves.

The mini-ateliers they had seen in the classrooms in Reggio Emilia led them to further develop the art area they had earlier created in the far corner of the classroom. A variety of tools and art materials are attractively displayed

on shelves that line the wall behind the area. In front of this are tables of different sizes, set up according to the needs of the group. This is where children collaborate to work on projects. Flexibility in the use of this work area is important in a small classroom.

The unexpected construction materials Michelle and Linda had seen on their visit to Reggio Emilia inspired them to make changes to the block area. The light projectors, platforms, etc., they had seen used with construction materials in Reggio Emilia gave them the idea of providing horizontal and vertical planes for children to build on. Earlier they had added a large box platform (63 cm × 127 cm × 76 cm) to the construction area. To enable children to build downwards as well as upwards, they now strung a hoop on a pulley from the ceiling above the platform and provided ropes, clips, tubes, and clothespins for hanging objects above block constructions. They also placed a light projector in the area so the children could throw shadows of their block constructions on the wall.

On the left as one enters the classroom is the group meeting area. On the adjustable shelves lining the wall of this area documentation and props are displayed relating to the current project. This wall provides a focus for the room and is often the first place a visitor is drawn to. The space declares itself the centre of action in the classroom. It is where everyone gathers to discuss important information, where teachers and children negotiate projects, and where children and teachers co-construct the curriculum.

This preschool environment that the teachers have created proclaims it is a place for congenial relationships and for showing respect for each other and the materials. The children respond with behaviour that matches the beautiful space.

On their return from Reggio Emilia, Linda and Michelle decided that rather than be carried away by a large project with the four-year-olds they would start by taking a more focused approach to the curriculum similar to the investigations of colour, texture, sound, and math that they had observed in Reggio Emilia. The children, however, had a different idea! When they



The display of children's work in the *Castle Project* for Mother's day at Marpole Oakridge Preschool.