



Transforming Environments Through Self-Reflection

by Wanda Billheimer and Gina Lewis

As Head Start Coordinators, we, like scores of others in early childhood education, are inspired and enthralled by the Schools of Reggio Emilia. As we discovered the ways of those Italian educators, a fire was rekindled within us. Our passion for and vision of the value of childhood was reawakened and we could not contain our enthusiasm. Any success we have in influencing others has been simply the result of sharing our enthusiasm, experiments, and discoveries as we explore the meanings and possibilities of early childhood education.

What we offer here is by no means the definitive way to empower teachers to transform their environments; it is the story of our experience.

In August, 1999 we participated in an in-service training given by Chicago Commons Head Start. They had been studying and applying the principles and practices of the Reggio Emilia approach for several years. It was thrilling and eye-opening to witness a Head Start program that incorporated the values expressed in Reggio Emilia.

In Chicago we experienced curricula that was intellectually stimulating, creative, and alive. This was manifest in the emergent project work, the use of documentation to make learning visible, the role of teacher as researcher, the emphasis on collaboration and community, the employment of reflective questions, and of course, the unique, engaging, and beautiful environments.



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We loved what we were seeing, hearing, and feeling and we also knew we didn't fully comprehend it. We understood that copying or duplicating what we saw would not work. We didn't know how to capture and apply the essence of what we were witnessing. The primary thing that we were clear about was the potency of personal reflection. We saw that this type of teaching had to be developed from within the hearts and minds of the educators and caregivers. Full of hope and energy we returned to our Head Start family child care providers in the Pacific Northwest with photos and anecdotes.

Changing Our Meetings/Methods

As Child Development Coordinators we work with family child care providers who contract with our program. We meet with our 12 providers once a month for two hours. In the past we usually spent the first hour on announcements and administrative issues and the second hour on training on Head Start standards, documents, and systems. It was during these monthly meetings that we initiated a change. We invited our family child care providers to question, challenge, consider, and think with us. What are we doing in our work with children? Why? What is the child's perspective? What do we really want for children? For ourselves? How can we have it?

Groping for a starting place, we began by exploring the concept of "the image of the child." We learned that the Schools of Reggio Emilia are founded on holding a particular image of the child, a perspective that honors children as intelligent, capable, creative, resourceful, and worthy individuals. The reason for having beautiful, dynamic environments is to support and encourage the development of such children. We read Loris Malaguzzi's article, "Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins" (March/April, 1994) and discussed its meaning for us. As a group we recognized that often our stated image did not correspond to our practices.

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Early educators say we respect children, yet in our practice we often manipulate and objectify them. If we truly respect children and believe they are intelligent, why do we provide curriculum that only asks them to receive what we think rather than asks what they think? These adult driven agendas limit the opportunities and possibilities for children. These adult curriculum activities typically are topics that are irrelevant and meaningless to children's lives.

We were determined to begin to hold our practices up against our image of the child, beginning with the environment. This seemed a logical place to start as it was concrete, practical, and immediate.

We gave the providers several small convex mirrors (the kind used to enhance vision on the side mirrors of cars) and asked them to place them in their child care environments. We asked them to observe the children's reactions and to consider their own responses. We discussed their discoveries at the following meeting. This was a small and simple beginning, yet it was a huge shift in our practice; we were asking the providers to observe, reflect upon, and record their own emotions and thoughts in relation to their work.

The following are our questions and some provider responses from this initial experiment:

■ How could the use of mirrors enhance children's thinking, socializing, and self-concept?

The mirrors helped them see each other differently, without looking directly at each other's faces. They really engaged each other when they captured glances.

The mirrors give a view of the children and the surroundings that they may not have seen before.

■ What did you find out about the children from their interactions with the mirrors?

That they use things differently than adults think they will.

The children are actually quite observant of each other. They would study the other's expression and then copy or just enjoy it. It's amazing the power that facial expressions have.

■ What did you learn about yourself — your thoughts, reactions, feelings — from this experience?

I was surprised by the children's reactions; I didn't realize how fascinated they could be by such a common item.

It was fun to see the children's reactions to a simple thing and how many questions arose from this.

I learned how good it is to see your own face. Everyone else sees you all day. It doesn't need to be "vanity" to want to see yourself more often. It feels good.

This initial experience with mirrors gave birth to a pattern of Provocation/Reflection/Dialogue. We began to repeat this pattern throughout the next several months of meetings.

Providing Worksheets for Observations and Self-Reflection

Poetry, children's books, visits to each other's homes, quotes, simulations, our own childhood memories, chapters of *The Hundred Languages* (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998), guest speakers, and slides of beautiful child care spaces all served as provocations for our reflections and dialogue. The provocations were followed by a monthly activity worksheet of reflective questions, often including observations of children or themselves. These written reflections by providers were followed by group discussions at our meetings in which more insight was gained into our own values, motivations, practices, and strengths. What each provider brought to and received from exchanges in our meeting was highly individualized. Each was provoked to seriously consider their values along with their image of the child.

Through this process the providers were empowered and their child care environments began to transform. Some of the changes were subtle, others quite dramatic:

■ *We love it. It is a space that we are drawn to even when the child care is closed. When we have company over, we always seem to end up there. Children and adults enjoy spending time in that space. I didn't really know how important the environment was . . . it makes a difference in the way children play. It enhances and extends their play. I thought if it makes that much difference for them it can do that for me too.*

■ *I've grown in the idea of a less commercial environment.*

■ *In ECE classes I was taught to have specific areas for specific activities. Now, we don't have spaces where certain activities must*

stay. There is flexibility in how the space is used, which continues to interest the children and gives them many choices. For me, to limit where they set up or where they move toys and materials is to tell them that their instincts to explore and move are not good. That's certainly not the message I want to send.

■ I realized that using glass tumblers instead of plastic sippy cups and dishes instead of paper plates shows respect for the children. The children, in turn, use the tumblers and dishes with care.

Making Changes Visible

During visits to the providers' homes we began to photograph the changes they were making to their environments. Soon we had a collection of before and after pictures. We copied these onto transparencies (and later into a digital presentation) and presented them at our monthly meetings. This provided the participants with the experience of having one's own learning made visible. More questions, considerations, and possibilities were generated as we studied the before and after photos together.

We believe these transformations were profound because they were born from the providers' own experiences and insights into their values and their image of the child.

Changes for Us

Creating a social and emotional environment conducive to reflective practice was important in being able to ask providers to think about their work on a deeper level. The "environment" in our relationships with the providers also had an impact on the transformations we witnessed. These environments, expressing the "soft virtues of hospitality" (Palmer, 2002) invited dialogue and risk taking. Trust was built as we conveyed to the providers that we were not experts in this process and we, too, were learning. We let them know that we were exploring the Reggio Emilia approach alongside them and that we had no right or wrong answers. This exploration was a parallel learning process for all of us. We knew it was important to model how we hoped they would work with children (Jones, 1986). Sharing our excitement and experiences and being open about our discoveries encouraged providers to do the same.

We found that we were becoming stronger in our philosophy and beliefs as we witnessed how empowered these family child care providers became while participating in these experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Their environments were a metaphor for what was taking place inside of them. Their image of the child was becoming clearer as was the

image they had of themselves. They knew that we appreciated and valued their work and were just as excited about their discoveries and growth as they were.

Using before and after photos of their child care environments was a powerful way for providers to see how much they had changed. In the writings of Carter & Curtis (2003), Malaguzzi and Greenman we found corresponding ideas that validated our perspective on how environments convey messages of what is valued by the people who live in them.

It has been nearly five years now, and we still haven't impacted all of our staff, nor reached all of our goals, but we have made significant changes. Our suggestion to others interested in transforming their environments (which in turn transforms other aspects of your program) is to start asking questions of yourself and your staff. Try using the process of Provocation/Reflection/Dialogue. This may help you to design environments that embody your own ideas of "best practice."

We must ask ourselves what values we want to communicate through learning environments, and how we want children to experience their time in our programs. From the physical to the social and emotional environment, how are we demonstrating that we respect and treasure childhood and the identity of particular children and families? Are we showing pride in our work and an ongoing commitment to developing ourselves and our profession? (Curtis & Carter, 2003)

References

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

■ CREATING INVITATIONS TO ENGAGE CHILDREN by Deb Curtis

Invitations — an opportunity to explore children's thinking: Curtis introduces the idea of invitations as a source of enhancing emerging interests children have as well as to challenge additional areas of consideration or exploration. Try this idea out with your faculty by setting up some "invitations" using the guidelines and principles shared in this article as starting points for discussion between and among teachers. Send teachers back to try out their ideas and reconvene to report what happened.

Designing environments: Curtis has a new book out with Margie Carter that has numerous photographs and ideas for environments. Consider locating a copy of this book and adding it to your faculty library.

■ EMERGENT ENVIRONMENTS: INVOLVING CHILDREN IN CLASSROOM DESIGN by Sarah Felstiner

Choosing to change: What a challenge! Use this article to discuss with your faculty the advantages of choosing to change from the way we do it now to a new way. Explore your teachers' resistance to change to see if its origins are sound or just based on tradition and experience. Take the next step as well — consider what changes might be in order.

A starting place: Work with families and teachers to collect the list of resources on p. 42 (and any other resources teachers identify) to create moveable parts for the indoor environment. Then move on to the outdoor environment.

Let the children help?: The interesting idea of including children in the redesign of the classroom may sound challenging but is worth a try. Explore with teachers how one or more areas of the classroom might consider the children's input on design, function, and equipping. If one works, take on another one with children's support.

A great idea! Felstiner proposes a starting place for helping children and families convert the classroom to a place they feel powerful and reflects and connects to its occupants. Adding the faces of families is that starting place. Work with families to explore how to do this and create your own starting place for collaboration.

■ GREAT PLACES TO BE A BABY: INFANTS' AND TODDLERS' LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS by Jim Greenman

My place is you! This interesting idea deserves further consideration. How much does your physical space and approach to early care and education take this important idea into consideration? Explore with teachers this powerful idea of the connection between mother/teacher and baby as the territory of development. See if you can develop strategies to validate and value this idea in your environment.

Take our infants and toddlers to task: Greenman identifies several jobs for infants and toddlers. Divide teachers into teaching teams and explore how their classrooms, routines, and curriculum support these important jobs. Plan additional ways to do so and implement the plan.

Make your own environmental inventory: Take this magnificent list of infant and toddler learning centers and conduct a classroom inventory. Make sure your classrooms are a great place to be a baby or toddler and to be with a baby or toddler rather than a dispiriting place with too much plastic and too limited opportunity.

■ TRANSFORMING ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH SELF-REFLECTION by Wanda Billheimer and Gina Lewis

Walking in your shoes: What a gift from these talented people! A starting place for sure — one that you can customize and modify to fit your faculty. Begin the reflective process by modifying your meetings just like these authors did and see what happens. For teachers (and administrators) to whom reflection is new, this experience will be powerful and produce rich, unexpected results.

Before and after: Use the idea of before and after photos as a metaphor for considering the changes brought about by reflection. Talk often about before, then consider after to open up the possibilities. Take before pictures of the environment, start your reflective experiences, and then wait to see what "after" becomes.

What is a provocation?: Reggio Emilia educators talk often about provocations — challenges to produce interest and responses from children or adults. Think carefully about your provocation — the starting point for reflection. You may want to use the one suggested in the article (exploring the view of the child; then using convex mirrors to reflect that image) or create your own.