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Children and Place: Reggio Emilia's Environment As Third Teacher

Education is often understood as the sole responsibility of parents and teachers. Reggio Emilia identifies a 3rd teacher between child, teacher, and parent: the environment. In its attention to how space can be thoughtfully arranged, Reggio Emilia has reconceptualized space as a key source of educational provocation and insight. In what ways does this idea support and challenge existing understandings within early childhood education? The article draws on educational literature on space(s) and early childhood education, including but not confined to Reggio Emilia, as well as classroom-based practice, to pursue the implications of the notion of environment as 3rd teacher to classrooms and teacher education and how

both preservice and experienced teachers can use this knowledge to inform their practice.

THE REGGIO EMILIA approach to education talks about three educators as being in the classroom at any one time: the teacher, the child, and the environment. We do not usually think of the environment as alive, in the way that a person is; instead, we see it as coming about as a result of human imagination and work (Arendt, 1958; Frye, 1963), that is, if we truly see it at all. Maxine Greene, drawing on Virginia Woolf, reminded us of how we become immersed in the "cotton wool of habit" (Woolf, cited in Greene, 1995, p. 115). By seeing the environment as an educator, as the Reggio Emilia approach does, we can begin to notice how our surroundings can take on a life of their own that contributes to children's learning.

Childhood is often the first place where we begin to see and use the environment imaginatively. Kytta (2002) described the affordances that enhance children's environments as what it is possible to do, or imagine to do, due to aspects of a

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place that children perceive as valuable. Take swinging, for instance. Swinging is possible where a child can find nonrigid, attached objects, such as a strong rope attached to a tree or pole, or a swing in a park. When one of the authors was teaching elementary school in a First Nations community on the Central Coast of British Columbia, she liked the corner classroom at the end of the hallway. Because it was located where the undergrowth was thickest, the classroom was often enveloped in a greenish light. Topics rich in local anecdote and story, like the sasquatch, could come alive. The filtered greenish light also reminded her of her "deep down" image of the child (Fraser, 2006, p. 20) and those "secret spaces of childhood" (Goodenough, 2004, p. 1) where she used to play hide-and-seek with other children in the neighborhood.

Fraser (2006), in her work with preservice teachers, has identified eight Reggio principles as key to the environment as third teacher: aesthetics, transparency, active learning, flexibility, collaboration, reciprocity, bringing the outdoors in, and relationships. If we interpret these principles in light of research on children and place, we find that a Reggio Emilia approach to the role of the environment in teaching and learning draws deeply on how young children perceive and use space to create meaning. In this article, we explore Reggio Emilia's idea of the environment as a third teacher and consider how teachers (preservice and inservice) can look again at the messages and invitations contained in their classroom surroundings so as to draw more deeply on children's perspectives.

Environment As Third Teacher: What Does That Really Mean?

When we think of the environment, we tend to think of what we can see around us. However, the environment is much more than visual. Tarr (2001, 2004) studied the environments of kindergarten and primary classrooms, imagining not only how they looked but how they felt from a child's perspective:

From a small chair in a corner, I counted 19 different, decorated, scalloped borders segmenting portions of the bulletin boards lining the walls. The boards were filled with words: a word wall, class rules, a calendar, alphabets, numbers, shapes and colors, and a plethora of cartoon people and animals, each with a message and at least 50 of them with horseshoe-shaped smiles rather like a capital U ... St. Patrick's Day mobiles created from brightly painted rainbows and black-line masters hung from the ceiling just above the children's heads. Rainbows, leprechauns, and pots of gold jiggled before my eyes. (Tarr, 2004, p. 88)

Tarr (2004) wondered how this "visual busyness" influences children's concentration (p. 88). She also questioned the implicit messages behind the choice of materials and whether "the mass of commercial stereotyped images silence the actual lived experiences of those individuals learning together" (Tarr, 2004, p. 90).

An important and desirable human activity for young children is interaction with others. Bearne, Dombey, and Grainger (2003) further comment that "interaction should have the dynamic to move thinking and learning" (p. 2). How the configuration and conceptualization of spaces work to invite, hinder, or facilitate interaction has been the subject of study for scholars in early childhood (e.g., Ellis, 2004) as well as scholars in several fields (Jacobs, 1961/1992, 2004; Project for Public Spaces, 2005; Seamon, 1979). Jacobs (2004) explained that "For communities to exist, people must encounter one another in person" (pp. 36-37; cited in Robertson, 2006). Seamon (1979) has drawn on Jacobs's (1961) work to describe *place ballet*, or the bodily regularity of people coming together in time and space. A Reggio Emilia approach involves maintaining a "delicate balance" between providing structure and encouraging children's free exploration (Tarini & White, 1998, p. 379). Seeing the "environment as third teacher" is one way of playing this place ballet, but how?

A Reggio Emilia approach advocates that teachers pay close attention to the myriad of ways that space can be made to "speak" and invite interaction (Cadwell, 2003; Fraser, 2006), such as positioning small mirrors around the classroom or

placing easels close to natural sunlight. Educators can introduce “provocations” meant to surprise children and spark discussion, like a pizza box in the kitchen corner, paper and pencil in the blocks center, or aromatic scents to tantalize the children’s noses when they first enter the classroom. Other strategies include bringing in realistic objects for children to use in their play, such as different colors and shapes of pasta in the house corner. By storing colorful objects in transparent containers (markers, buttons, fabrics, wrapping paper), which children can help sort by color or texture, children’s curiosity and imagination are piqued. Cadwell (2003) explained how, before seeing the environment as central to learning, children used to dump their blocks on the floor or empty containers of sequins on the light table. Now, the materials are carefully selected and arranged to invite exploration. On low shelves, the child can find “transparent jars of shells, buttons, beads, wires, tiny pine cones, dried rose metals, sequins in the shape of flowers, and spiral shavings from colored pencils,” all of which “reflect the light and reveal their enticing contents” (Cadwell, 2003, p. 117). From a child’s perspective, such small changes animate the environment, making it feel “electric and alive” (Cadwell, 2003, p. 118). “Life attracts life,” Jacobs (1992, cited in Robertson, 2006, p. 26) explained. Children come to care for their surroundings as well as see them in unexpected ways, which becomes part of a planned approach to curriculum and evaluation that is organized around “expecting the unexpected,” a favorite Reggio Emilia saying. This approach to curriculum planning is called the *negotiated curriculum*.

Through negotiated curriculum, also called *emergent curriculum* (Jones & Nimmo, 1995), teachers engage in a recursive cycle of design, documentation, and discourse (Forman & Fyfe, 1998; Fraser, 2006). They introduce a provocation. They listen closely to children’s conversations as they engage with their surroundings. They document the children’s learning using such devices as note-taking, sketches, tape recording, video recording, and photographs, so as to create a visible trace of the learning process. Teachers also reflect and talk with other teachers or with the

children. They use what they hear, see, and think about to plan a next activity, one that will build on as well as deepen the children’s interest and investigation. A group of teachers described how teachers’ views of glue changed when they stopped seeing it as instrumental to creating a collage and instead first created opportunities for children to explore the properties of glue: What did it feel like when wet and dry? How could it be “dripped” and into what shapes? What could be done with glue and a paintbrush, stick, or cotton swab? The teachers observed the children during this exploratory phase and recorded their observations. At one point, the teachers wondered whether they should continue with exploration or challenge the children in a new direction. By reviewing their observation records, they decided that the younger children were still exploring whereas the older ones were ready to move on. Rather than separate the children into two groups, they set out, on different days, bowls of glitter, sequins, and beads. The older children began to construct objects, whereas the younger ones discovered that a paper containing all glitter but no glue needed glue as a necessary adhesive. When the children then moved on to create collages, the teachers observed that they were much more thoughtful and deliberate, rather than “impulsively and randomly” gluing the materials on the paper (Kantor & Whaley, 1998, p. 330).

Huyssen (2003) reminded us that “lived memory is active, alive, embodied in the social” (p. 28). Documentation is a living testimony to interactions that happen within a social space. Their story can be told through children’s portfolios, drawings, three-dimensional structures, words, photographs, videos, and documentation panels. Cadwell (2003) described how classroom shelves became a living archive of the interactions that had happened in that space: a matching game made of clay shapes, stones from a visit to a beach, a carved wooden puzzle donated by a family, and a paper sculpture of “Girl Land” with movable parts (pp. 109–110). Behind each is a story. Further, the objects invite other children to take them out and play with them. If prefabricated commercial images serve to silence children’s voices (Tarr, 2004, p. 115), documentation gives voice to the “in-

dividual and group histories" (Gandini, 1998, p. 168) of those who inhabit the space, creating a community memory. By making the walls "speak" with the children's learning, parents and other adults are also invited into a dialogue so that messages do not "bounce away" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 176) into empty or overly cluttered space. The practice of making the walls "speak" draws on the idea of creating "places for children."

Children's Places Versus Places for Children

From a child's point of view, an environment is what the child can make of it. Children will often find uses for objects and spaces that adults do not anticipate or intend. For instance, Armitage (2001) has documented that one of the most popular spots where he observed children playing marbles on school grounds was on metal drains. During "marbles season," "the whole feature [of the drain] disappears under a crowd of people [namely, children] playing marbles along the metal slots that run across its length" (p. 46). Another popular spot was the drain cover. Children considered some drain covers as more challenging than others, depending on how the ridges were dispersed in the maze of lines surrounding the center. Rasmussen (2004) invited children to use disposable cameras to take pictures of the places where they most often played and that had meaning for them. One enclosed courtyard flanked by apartment buildings shows play apparatus that adults had installed for children: swings, a slide, a sandbox, a basketball post, and net. While mentioning all of these places, Line (one young girl with a camera) focused on the tree, which was actually off limits to the children, as was a green box covering electricity cables. Nevertheless, the children climbed in and around both of these places when "the caretaker" was "not looking" (p. 161). Rasmussen wryly commented as follows: "The last two spaces are places that children take to be very important, at the same time as using them gives rise to conflict between children and adults" (p. 161). She distinguished between the structured places that adults create for children and the places

where children invest imaginative energy; she called the latter, "children's spaces."

Children, Place, and the Classroom

Children love to create their own worlds at their own scale in any environment they can manipulate or modify. Young children also like novel objects to explore and interesting events to witness. What children also value most in favorite places are opportunities for social affiliation and creative exploration or self-development. As Ellis (2002, 2003, 2004) has reviewed, place is a source of meaning, belonging, and identity largely due to the relationships facilitated by bonds to place. In his research with children, Moore (1986) concluded that exploration of the natural environment intensifies friendships just as friendships prompt exploration of the environment. Langhout (2003) has reported consistent findings that autonomy, social support, and positive feelings are associated with children's place attachment or sense of place. Reviewing research related to the greening of schoolyards—a movement to replace some of the barren grass, asphalt, or wood chips areas with naturalized environments for children's exploration and play—White (2004) pointed out that natural environments stimulate social interaction between children, are important to children's development of independence and autonomy, buffer the impact of life stress on children and help them deal with adversity, and improve children's cognitive development by heightening their awareness, reasoning, and observational skills.

Because children's experiences are limited by the places they inhabit, it is vitally important that we pay attention to those places (Chawla, 1992, 2002; Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Ellis (2005) argued that thinking about planning for teaching as "planning for place-making" can productively support children's development of community, positive identities, and successful learning. By using a Reggio-inspired assignment called the "Marketplace," preservice teachers became excited about perceiving the world through the eyes of a child.

The Marketplace of Learning

You'll know where you are because of the people with bulging white plastic bags heading in the opposite direction, bags that if opened would spill out with color, life, and the week's groceries: apples, strawberries, lettuce, red peppers, figs, a brown loaf of bread studded with seeds. We are within the vicinity of the Jean Talon market. The sounds grow louder as we approach a large square crisscrossed by rows of stalls and throngs of people. Each stall features fruit, vegetables, pies, maple sugar, or flowers, laid out in a feast of multi-colors, rich and layered, a sight bewildering at first until you learn to discriminate by color, texture, and of course, price. Meanwhile, there are also sounds to take in (people jostling, laughing, speaking in a number of languages; merchants hovering, poised to discourse on the value of their produce) as well as the smells, with the expectation of taste, whetting the palate.

This is a short account that Strong-Wilson wrote based on her impressions of a popular fruit and vegetable market in Montreal. For 3 years, the author has been working on recreating such a marketplace in an undergraduate course. "The Kindergarten Classroom" is one of the required methods courses that elementary preservice teachers take in the 2nd year of their 4-year program and just prior to their first extended field experience in schools. Her use of the marketplace was first inspired by Fraser (2000, 2006), who described an assignment in which student teachers bring in objects to elucidate principles central to a Reggio Emilia educational philosophy: aesthetics, transparency, collaboration, relationships, bringing the outdoors in, reciprocity, flexibility, and active learning. Fraser's idea originated with Malaguzzi (1998), who has provided intellectual direction for Reggio Emilia, and first used the marketplace as a metaphor to describe the kind of stimulating learning environments that teachers can create in classrooms: "Customers look for the wares that interest them, make selections, and engage in lively interactions" (Malaguzzi, cited in Gandini, 1998, p. 173).

The author combines Reggio Emilia's notion of "environment as third teacher" with her own interest in touchstones, that is, memories of places (real

or imagined) to which adults continually circle back and that are often formed in childhood through play and stories (Strong-Wilson, 2006). Her purpose is twofold: (a) to encourage preservice teachers to see the world as if from a child's perspective, and (b) to perceive classroom surroundings in a new way, as a "third teacher." The course is divided into four themes: image of the child, teacher role, environment as third teacher, and curriculum. Linking across the four themes is a teacher portfolio. The format of the portfolio invites student teachers to draw connections among themes. The process begins with the image of the child theme, in which they compose two autobiographies about their childhood; one on stories, the other on toys and games. In small groups, they share and discuss their autobiographies. Outside of class, they also complete one of the following: a short narrative or sketch of a secret childhood place (Goodenough, 2004), a neighborhood map showing their favorite haunts from childhood, or an interview with a relative about stories or games that they remember from childhood. The author has found that through this initial writing and sharing about their early experiences, student teachers recall with often uncanny precision the spaces that they inhabited as well as the details of the interactions that they experienced there. Student teachers often comment that through the remembering, they relive the childhood experience. The author has also conducted this activity with inservice teachers, with the same results. The most poignantly remembered experiences are often those in which teachers, as children, had used their imagination to transform their environment in ways that the adults around them had not planned for or did not anticipate, thus creating "children's spaces." Tree branches became houses; cramped spaces became secret hide-outs; discarded building materials (wire, netting, pieces of wood) imaginative fodder for art, drama, and science; and a hammer transformed into a doll.

If we look closely at the eight Reggio principles in light of research on children and place, we find that they also coincide with how young children use and perceive space in unplanned ways, that is, with Rasmussen's (2004) notion of "children's places." For instance, aesthetics and trans-

parency draw our attention to how children are attracted by and curious about anything that engages their senses. The principle of flexibility articulates how children will often use objects in their play in ways not explicitly intended by the teacher or curriculum. Active learning recognizes how children learn through experimenting with and manipulating objects, whereas bringing the outdoors in acknowledges children's curiosity about the natural and social worlds surrounding them.

The marketplace creates a context in which preservice teachers become more thoughtful about how they can provoke children's interactions using everyday objects; the objects, placed in relationship with one another within the classroom, can carry messages that invite children to engage with the world. Because the assignment follows on memory work into early childhood experiences, the teachers' choices of objects bear traces of their remembered experiences of how stimulating and full of unexpected surprises the world often was as children; those remembered experiences are mostly of unplanned rather than planned opportunities for learning. The challenge that Reggio Emilia has taken up, through the notion of environment as third teacher, is to create rich contexts (a "marketplace") that allow children to find their own "affordances" through their interaction with objects and other people (Kyatta, 2002), and in which teachers, through documentation and negotiated curriculum, learn from children, thus creating a community memory.

Translating Theory Into Practice

How might the notion of "environment as third teacher" invite teachers to imagine new ways to use classroom space? One powerful strategy, as just discussed, is for teachers to have opportunities to recall as well as collectively discuss images of the child as formed within their childhood experiences. A particularly effective way of eliciting such childhood memories is through drawing a map of the neighborhood where one grew up (Frank, 2003) and identifying secret places where they played alone or with other children (Goodenough, 2004). Teachers can then examine class-

room and school environments for what they allow and what they prevent children from exploring and investigating. Another idea is for teachers to involve the children in the process, as in Rasmussen's (2004) study when she gave children disposable cameras and asked them to identify which places were most significant to them and why. Following on Tarr's (2004) suggestion, teachers can also conduct an informal inventory of what they see on their walls, in particular, looking for the presence of commercial images, and ask questions (like the following, based on Tarr, 2004, p. 90) about whether, how, or to what degree (going back to Bearne et al.'s [2003] definition of "interaction") their present uses of space "move thinking and learning," including their own as teachers as well as those of parents and caregivers: Why am I displaying these materials and for whom? What image of the child does the display communicate? Does the display honor children's voices and work? How can the walls invite active participation and learning on the part of the children as well as of their parents and caregivers? The classroom is more likely to become a child's favorite place if it supports autonomy, social affiliation, and creative exploration and expression. Attention to the "environment as third teacher," because it is so close to children's ways of interacting with the world, is one way to accomplish these goals.

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