

WHAT IS THE 'REGGIO APPROACH'?

The following factors are inherent in the Reggio Approach:

- the image of the child
- the expressive arts in the pre-school establishment
- *progettazione*
- community and parent–school relationships
- environment
- teachers as learners.

Each of these will be considered separately, although they are generally interrelated.

The Image of the Child

Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not only see them as engaged in action with objects, does not emphasise only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the reflective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and children.

Loris Malaguzzi³

All that takes place within the Reggio schools in terms of learning and teaching, building relationships and professional development stems from one overriding factor – the image of the child. Rather than seeing the child as an empty vessel waiting eagerly to be filled with knowledge, Reggio educators believe strongly in a child with unlimited potential who is eager to interact with and contribute to the world. They believe in a child who has a fundamental right to 'realise and expand their potential'. This is a child who is driven by curiosity and imagination, a capable child who delights in taking responsibility for his or her own learning, a child who listens and is listened to, a child with an enormous need to love and to be loved, a child who is *valued*. Indeed the way in which children's many strengths and abilities are valued and 'listened to' is fundamental to this approach. While international visitors so often concentrate on the graphic and visual aspects of children's work, the words and conversations of the children demonstrate capacities to reflect and make hypotheses on very complex and often abstract thoughts and ideas, when given the time and emotional space to do so. Fundamentally, then, this is an image of a child who is a subject of rights. This is highlighted in the creation of a 'Charter of Rights', a manifesto of the rights of parents and teachers as well as children, which is evident in every school. It states that: *Children have the right to be recognised as subjects of individual, legal, civil, and social rights; as both source and constructors of their own experience, and thus active participants in the organisation of their identities, abilities, and autonomy, through relationships and interaction with their peers, with adults, with ideas, with objects and with the real and imaginary events of intercommunicating worlds.*⁴

³ Malaguzzi, L., quoted in Penn, H., *Comparing Nurseries: Staff and Children in Italy, Spain and the UK*, Paul Chapman Publishing, 1997, p. 117.
⁴ *A Journey into the Rights of Children*, The Unheard Voice of Children series, Reggio Children, 1996.

Choosing to see children as the subject of rights rather than needs is a courageous choice which extends also to the way in which children with special needs are regarded. Fundamentally, in Reggio, such children are termed as having *special rights*. Reggio Emilia employs a wholly inclusive policy where such children are included in all levels of mainstream education. When a child with special rights is present in a particular class, that class is assigned an extra educator, but crucially the educator is considered to be extra support for the whole group and not just for the particular child. This decision is undoubtedly based on the central belief in socio-constructivism as the vehicle for learning and understanding for everyone in the learning group, be that educator or child.

By valuing children in this way educators put much more emphasis on really listening to children. Indeed, the pedagogical basis of the whole Reggio approach has been called the pedagogy of listening – listening being a metaphor for the educators' attempt to gain as real an understanding as possible of children and their learning processes. When our youngest children are literally listened to and given the time and space to express themselves we are faced with children capable of doing so in a much more complex and abstract way than children are generally given credit for. This is something that is revealed in the Reggio schools through the transcriptions of children's in-depth conversations at a daily level.

Unlike other pedagogies that can be guilty of treating early infancy as a preparation for later childhood and adulthood, and consequently seeing nursery education as a kind of antechamber to later stages of formal education, the Reggio Approach considers early infancy to be a distinct developmental phase in which children demonstrate an extraordinary curiosity about the world. Indeed, the name of the schools, *scuole dell'infanzia* (schools of early childhood), does not have the connotations of 'preparation' and 'pre-ness' inherent in the Anglo-American term 'pre-school'. This image of the child has a fundamental and far-reaching effect on the learning and teaching that takes place in the schools.

The Expressive Arts in the Pre-school: 'The Hundred Languages'

*The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking ...*

Loris Malaguzzi⁵

⁵ For a full reading of the poem see *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Catalogue of the Exhibition, Reggio Children, 1996.

One of the most interesting elements within the Reggio Approach is the central importance given to the expressive arts as a vehicle for learning. Detailed drawing activities are a daily occurrence in the schools and the outstanding standard of work produced by the children has become widely acknowledged. Children are also encouraged to participate in a variety of expressive activities such as sculpture, dramatic play, shadow play, puppetry, painting, dancing, music, ceramics, construction and writing. The plethora of resources in the schools' central *atelier* and the *mini atelier* in each classroom, as well as the presence of a full-time *atelierista* in each pre-school establishment, is testimony to the importance placed on this area of child development. Certain topics such as 'light and dark' recur as stimuli for children's learning, and teachers and children have a wide variety of material and resources at their disposal. For such a theme children may be given the opportunity to explore the effects of light and shadow using torches and light tables. They may have the opportunity to draw with light by making holes in black card that is lit from behind; they may be given the opportunity to create shadow stories using objects on an overhead projector, stories in which they themselves can physically become a part.

Over the years, visitors from other countries have occasionally questioned the concentration on the graphic languages over other subjects, for example music or expressive movement. It is undoubtedly true that the startling detail and expressiveness in children's drawings is a distinctive feature of the approach but it has never been considered the most important. In recent years the author has witnessed a tangible evolution in the development of other expressive languages with children. This can be seen clearly in children's work on many different projects such as the work on expressive movement done at the Choreia pre-school establishment in conjunction with the Aterballetto dance company and the outstanding exhibition of children's work *Dialoghi con i luoghi* which is currently on show in the new International Centre of Childhood. In recent years new *atelieristas* entering the schools have brought new and different skills with them; there are now *atelierista* who are dance or music specialists and this will undoubtedly have an impact on the way in which the expressive arts develops in these schools.

Why stress the expressive arts over literacy and numeracy?

Consistent with the work on *multiple intelligences*⁶ by American psychologist Howard Gardner, educators in Reggio Emilia are fully aware of the importance of developing all areas of learning and understanding, not only the logical and linguistic. While literacy and numeracy activities undoubtedly have their place in the daily activities of the pre-school establishments, teachers believe strongly in the central role that the expressive arts have to play, for many reasons.

- They acknowledge the fact that very young children are extremely expressive, with an enormous capacity for sharing feelings and emotion, and that imagination plays a key role in the child's search for knowledge and understanding.

⁶ Gardner, H., *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, NY: Basic Books, 1983.

- They are convinced of the overriding importance of the learning *process* rather than the final product. Involvement in the expressive arts allows the children to revisit subjects of interest over and over again through many different media to gain multiple perspectives and a higher level of understanding.
- They are aware that, by concentrating too much on the development of the child's verbal and literary skills, teachers can covertly devalue the child's skilled use of their many non-verbal languages (Malaguzzi talked of a hundred and a hundred more). The child's capacity to communicate through gestures, glances, emotion, dance, music, sculpture, painting, story telling, scribed stories and many more is therefore greatly valued, and teachers strive to develop these in the child.
- They believe strongly that the expressive arts can give children the opportunity to look at and experience their world in many different ways. The children are encouraged to use all their senses to seek a greater understanding; through observation, analysis and piecing together what they experience, they dismantle and reassemble the original, creating a new and individual whole. Synaesthetic activities (such as encouraging children to make pictorial representations of smells or noises, for example) are a dominant feature and seek to give children a fuller understanding of the world. As Veia Vecchi, *atelierista* at the Diana pre-school establishment, states, 'it is through the process of transformation that we become closer to the very essence of life'.⁷

Progettazione

This is not a free journey but neither is it a journey with rigid timetables and schedules; rather, it is akin to a journey guided by a compass.

Carlina Rinaldi⁸

Notoriously difficult to translate, the term *progettazione* is often understood to mean emergent curriculum or child-centred curriculum, but the reality is far more complex. Reggio educators talk of working without a teacher-led curriculum but this does not mean that forward thinking and preparation do not take place. Rather, teachers learn to observe children closely, listen to them carefully and give value to their own ideas so that they might gain an understanding of what interests children most and create strategies that allow the children to build upon their interests. Topics for study can come from the children themselves, from subjects that the teacher knows naturally interest children and also from the family and the greater community. Projects do not follow rigid timetables but rather meander slowly at the pace of the children. Children may be involved in a specific project over a lengthy period of time but not every day; rather, they return to it as their interests dictate, revisiting and re-evaluating what they learn.

⁷ Vecchi, V., 'Children's Expressive Languages', lecture given at International Winter Institute, Reggio Emilia, January 1999.

⁸ Rinaldi, C., 'The Pedagogy of Listening', lecture given at International Winter Institute, Reggio Emilia, January 1998.

Children are the *protagonists* of their learning and are encouraged by teachers to develop projects and solve problems among themselves, using the teacher as a tool who can 'lend' help, information and experience when necessary. Central to this mode of learning and teaching is the development of reciprocal relationships of love and trust between adult and child and between the children themselves. Learning always takes place within a group setting because Reggio educators see interaction and the consideration of differing points of view to be fundamental to the learning process. The building of such relationships and indeed the development of such projects that can continue for days, weeks and sometimes the school year, takes a great amount of time and cannot be constrained by school timetables or specialist curricular lessons. Time, and how it is conceived, is therefore an important factor. Within the nurseries, learning and teaching take place always at the pace of the child.

What is the role of the teacher in this type of learning process?

The role of the teacher in the learning–teaching relationship known as *progettazione* can be summarised as follows.

- The teacher seeks to know each child as an individual person and to create a trusting relationship in which learning can take place.
- The teacher strives to support and encourage the child on the learning journey, encouraging them to reflect and to question. In this sense, the role of the teacher is not to dispense information or simply to correct. Rather, the teacher is like a tool that the children use when most needed. Sometimes they may observe; at other moments they act as co-investigators or scribes. They may challenge or provoke ideas through the use of open-ended questions and provocations of many kinds. Indeed, a fundamental stage in *progettazione* is knowing how to relaunch an idea or concept with the children in a way which provokes them into taking their understanding and experience to the next level.
- There is an enormous respect for children's own theories and hypotheses. Allowing children to make mistakes in their quest to solve problems is considered fundamental to the learning process. Teachers are not quick to intervene at every problem the children confront. Indeed, allowing children to travel along what the adult may consider 'the wrong path' and encouraging the children to realise this autonomously is considered an important, if controversial, learning strategy. Through close observation and evaluation of evidence, the teacher learns to judge when intervention is most appropriate. It is only when time is taken to build a close and trusting relationship with the children that the teacher can become confident in this role. This remains one of the principal reasons for teachers and children remaining together for the three-year duration.
- The teacher is also a researcher into the ways in which children learn. Indeed, the place of ongoing research in the classroom has grown and developed significantly throughout the years. While what is termed research in Reggio schools may not always be equated with scientific research in tertiary educational establishments, there is no doubt as to the value of the search for meaning and understanding that Reggio educators strive for. Carlina Rinaldi has described the place of this research in the following way:

'Research as a term capable of describing the straining to know which is activated each time authentic processes of knowledge are created. Research to describe the individual and common journey in the direction of new universes of possibility ...'

Carlina Rinaldi⁹

As such the educator must observe the child's learning process as closely as possible. By observing, the teacher enters into a relationship with the child. Reggio educators spend a huge amount of time observing children working in small groups in an attempt to come closer to the children's understanding. The process of observation is considered partial and subjective, hence the need to observe and re-observe and to consider varying points of view.

Documentation

Fundamental to the teacher's role is the *documentation* of the child's learning process. Documentation, in terms of photographic and written wall panels placed at both adult and child height, is a prominent feature of the schools and centres. However, when teachers talk of creating documentation they mean something much more complex. It is important to understand that documentation in terms of the Reggio Emilia Approach is a process which takes place *during* the child's learning. It is not something that is made after the child has finished working. This has huge implications for the teacher's role and for the path children's learning is encouraged to take. As educators observe, document and analyse children's learning journeys, they are able to make informed hypotheses about how to guide children in their learning. It is obvious then that documentation is far removed from photographic displays of completed project work.

Carlina Rinaldi offers the following explanation:

Documentation means to produce traces of an observation.

Documentation makes visible.

Documentation is for children, teachers, parents, society.

*Documentation can give an image of the child ...*¹⁰

And again:

Documentation is a way of entering the dark zone; of understanding how we learn.

*Documentation helps us to share the responsibility of teaching.*¹¹

And again, she states:

*Documentation is this process, which is dialectic, based on affective bonds and also poetic; it not only accompanies the knowledge-building process but in a certain sense impregnates it.*¹²

⁹ Reggio Children, *Reggio Children* (mission statement), Reggio Children, 2005, p. 14.

¹⁰ Rinaldi, C., 'The Pedagogy of Listening', lecture given during American Study Tour, Reggio Emilia, May 1998.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Rinaldi, C., 'Documentation and Assessment: What is the Relationship?' in *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners*, Project Zero and Reggio Children, 2001, p. 86.

- Because teachers at Reggio believe strongly in the partiality of any given opinion and therefore in the necessity to share and discuss differing points of view, they use a variety of means for the creation of documentation including audio and video recordings, photographs, drawings and written notes. These are always transcribed, listened to again and again, and shared with the co-teacher and indeed all the educators in school.
- It is through sharing and discussing documentation that teachers feel most able to interpret and evaluate the learning process and to anticipate the most appropriate step to take with the children. In this sense the documentation can be seen to represent an assessment of the child's learning while also providing opportunities for self-assessment as children revisit their experiences. As the teachers revisit the documentation again and again they gain a closer understanding of the child's capabilities and possibilities. It is a fundamental belief of the Reggio teachers that through documentation they are able to evaluate – or give *value* – not simply to what the child can do but what the child *could* do, given the correct opportunity. *Progettazione* therefore cannot be equated with a set curriculum of any sort as learning does not develop in a linear manner and cannot be organised into complete 'units'. Rather, by building a trusting relationship with the child and accompanying and guiding them on the path of their learning, by documenting their learning processes and giving value to all the child's possibilities, the teacher creates a reciprocal relationship of learning and teaching.

Progettazione is a metaphorical dance between teacher and child – a spiral of knowledge.

Carlina Rinaldi¹³

Community and Parent–School Relationships

I've learned a lot of things from the infant-toddler centre and pre-school my grandson has attended. They have made me feel alive because I have had to reflect on those values that have always characterised my life ... I feel the need to grow with my grandson and this has given me a new outlook on life.

Luciano Gozzi, grandparent¹⁴

Reggio educators describe their approach to learning and teaching as a 'pedagogy of relationships' as it is founded on the conviction that we learn through making connections between things, concepts and experiences, and that we do so by interacting with other people and with our surrounding environment. This is evident in the key role given to participation at every level: both within school (between children and between children and adults) and also outwith the school (between families and school and between the greater community and school). Parent and Community Participation is one of the most distinctive features of the Reggio Approach. Its central importance to the life of the school is highlighted in the Charter of Rights, which includes a section on the rights of parents, and states:

¹³ Rinaldi, C., 'The Pedagogy of Listening', lecture given during American Study Tour, Reggio Emilia, May 1998.

¹⁴ Gozzi, L., in Fontanesi, G., 'Grandparents at the Infant-toddler Centres and Pre-schools', *Rechild*, No. 2, April 1998.

It is the right of parents to participate actively, and with voluntary adherence to the basic principles, in the growth, care and development of their children who are entrusted to the public institution.¹⁵

There are strong historical, political and cultural factors that render the idea of participation particularly workable in this part of Italy.

As previously stated, the very first pre-school establishments, built in the immediate post-war period, were quite literally built by the people. The Reggiani people have long been known to advocate socialism, and during World War II organised resistance to the fascist regime was particularly strong in this area.

Collectivity and co-operation remain important elements of Reggio Emilia and the Emilia-Romagna area of Italy in general. This is highlighted in economic terms by the continued presence of economically viable agricultural and industrial co-operatives, in political terms by the continued significant support for the Communist Parties and socially by the presence of a strong 'group culture'. Reggio's squares are often filled with men standing, talking in groups while women shop in the market, and young people go out normally in large groups. Indeed, the existence of the very many town squares throughout the town is testimony to the importance of a meeting place, a place where discussion takes place and ideas are exchanged. Discussion is very much part of the Italian way of life, and what may be considered a full-blown argument in Britain may simply be a 'healthy discussion' in Italy. In many ways the evolution of the municipal schools is a result of this culture, which continues to consider the welfare of young children as the collective responsibility of the community and in which conflict and differing points of view are regarded as essential aspects of learning.

This is an educational approach which has strong cultural roots not always easily understood by people from other cultures or indeed from other parts of Italy. Equally, the changes in family life mean that people generally have different expectations of schools and the services they provide. In recent years the changing demographics and influx of immigrants into Reggio Emilia and the rest of northern Italy has brought new challenges for the town in terms of participation. The municipality has begun this year to take positive steps towards encouraging increased participation from non-Italian families by working closely with families and with the schools' city-childhood councils on developing a cultural mediation programme which includes formal and informal meetings with families and the placing of cultural mediators in schools to work directly with educators, families and children. The fundamental importance put on dialogue, discussion and positive confrontation, however, both within the school system and in Reggiano culture generally, means that the reciprocal relationship based on participation remains at the centre of the Reggio Approach. In pedagogical terms the concept of participation remains a fundamental part of the Reggio Approach, as Carlina Rinaldi explains:

¹⁵ *A Journey through the Rights of Children*, The Unheard Voice of Children series, Reggio Children, 1996.

... participation is an educational strategy that characterises our way of being and teaching. Participation of the children, the teachers and the families, not only by taking part in something but by being part of it, its essence, part of a common identity, a 'we' that we give life to through participation.¹⁶

The development of strong links between the home and school encourages:

- continuity in the children's lives
- the creation of a reciprocal network of communication
- participation by all involved (children, teachers, parents, community) in the life of the school
- feelings of 'ownership' by all involved.

How do parents and families participate in the life of the schools?

Participation is encouraged at various levels.

- Participation begins even before the children have started school, through a comprehensive integration programme. This involves meetings between children, parents and teachers to build an image of the child as an individual, and often involves the child doing a task such as making a 'holiday booklet' of photographs and favourite nursery rhymes, etc., which can be used as stimulus for discussion between child and teacher. Integration takes place over a period of approximately one week and parent contact is gradually reduced so that the child gains confidence in the new environment. The integration period is considered extremely important, not only for the child but also for parents and teachers, as it is at this stage that a relationship of collaboration and trust is built.
- Parents can also be asked to become directly involved in the observation and documentation process of their child's learning if the school thinks it would be valuable to understand how the child acts in the home setting, so allowing teachers to build a more complete image of the child. The parent may be asked to keep a journal, for example, and take photographs that are then shared with teachers and with other parents in a group setting. Meetings to discuss children's learning experiences are frequent and tend to take place in a group setting, reflecting Reggio educators' belief in the group dynamic.
- At a daily level parents participate by interacting with educators and other parents when going to collect their child at the end of the day. Reggio educators are always willing to dedicate a surprising amount of time not only to speaking to parents but also, crucially, to listening to them every day. Documentation also plays a key role in parents' daily participation in their children's experiences by means of the daily agenda which is produced for parents at the end of each day. It describes the activities children have been involved in and over recent years it has become increasingly visual, with the widespread diffusion of digital photography and scanning facilities. Parents are therefore able to see photos of children interacting on the same day they were taken. This allows parents to enter into their child's experience and create meaningful dialogue with them and is very different from settings which witness the use of closed-circuit television and direct internet access to pre-school classrooms, and which contribute to what Carlina Rinaldi has termed 'the culture of suspicion'.

¹⁶ Rinaldi, C., in Fontanesi, G., 'Grandparents at the Infant-toddler Centres and Pre-schools', *Rechild*, No. 2, April 1998.

- At a practical level, participation takes place in many different ways. Parents and grandparents are encouraged to contribute to the upkeep of the buildings and gardens by volunteering to repair furniture, paint surfaces and equipment, make and build toys and equipment, and tend to gardens and play areas, in short volunteering any particular experience they have. Their involvement is also encouraged through participation in school outings and celebrations. Parties for particular family groups such as grandparents are often held to celebrate the importance and uniqueness of these relationships.
- At a more theoretical level, parents are involved in the life of the schools through elected membership of school councils known as *Consiglio Infanzia-Città* (city-childhood councils). Members of the council are encouraged to participate in meetings held by the schools to discuss policy concerns and educational matters. They do not take any part in the hiring of staff or in the distribution of funds in the schools. Rather, they participate in many different pedagogical projects. At the time of writing, for example, parents have been involved with educators and *pedagogistas* in the rewriting of the Charter of Values for the institution which now runs the municipal infant-toddler centres and pre-school establishments. Parents are also involved in groups that deal with the refurbishment of school buildings and gardens. Another group is presently working with cultural mediators on the development of a cultural project which seeks to create dialogue between the many different cultures now participating in the schools.
- One of the most interesting aspects of participation in the Reggio schools is the role the schools play in adult learning. Crucial to participation in Reggio Emilia is the conviction that parents are competent individuals in their own right who contribute to the social and cultural growth of the school. This goes far beyond participation such as keeping parents informed, or even encouraging involvement, but is rather participation in the form of working co-operatively to create culture through the organisation of regular talks and practical evenings where parents and families are given the opportunity to discuss various topics, such as child health, diet, and the role of religion in education, with experts in the field. Parents also have the opportunity to attend evenings run by the school cooks, who explain and demonstrate how to prepare balanced meals for young children.
- Parents are also encouraged to take on the role of learner at research level. A good example of this is the year-long work completed by groups of parents from many schools on the theme of 'Questions Facing Education'. The research culminated in a conference of the same name that took place in 1998. As part of the conference four parents presented papers on themes such as 'Can We Teach Without Feelings?' and 'Education and Time: Should We Fill the Day or Live It?' to a large and varied audience. More recently parents were involved in a long reflection and research process that brought about the writing of the charter for the city-childhood councils.

When asked what participation means at a personal level parents responded in many ways. Below are some of their answers.

- *It is a search for opportunities for more profound exchange, confrontation and reflection so that we ourselves continue to grow as people.*
- *There is a need not to delegate our own child's education.*
- *Curiosity*
- *I see participation not just as personal, but also as social and cultural growth.*

The reciprocal relationships that exist between child, family, school and, indeed, community are therefore far-reaching indeed. To talk of a 'link' between families and home is to undervalue what actually takes place in Reggio. In reality it is not so much that families take part in the life of the school but rather that, together with the children and the teachers, they are the school. Paola Cagliari, *Pedagogista* of the municipal pre-school establishments, states this clearly when she says:

No teacher, no pedagogista, no parent can have individually more ideas or better ideas than those produced by a group that is in dialogue together. We are talking of a new ethic of living together, which presupposes listening, welcoming and the recognition of the other, whether that be an adult or a child.¹⁷

Environment

A Reggio pre-school is a special kind of place, one in which young human beings are invited to grow in mind, in sensibility and in belonging to a broader community.

Jerome S Bruner¹⁸

The physical environment of the Reggio schools is one of the most well known aspects and perhaps also one of the most misunderstood. It is a common misconception that to 'do Reggio' entails whitewashing walls and introducing mirrors, three-dimensional pyramids and light tables into the nursery classroom. The reality is of course much more complex. We must ask why these things are done in order to understand the significance of the environment in pedagogical terms.

Participation and collectivity, key ideas that permeate all areas of the Reggio Approach, are of fundamental importance in considering the creation and use of the physical space of the school. Rather than separate spaces being used for separate purposes, the schools are composed of a series of connecting spaces that flow into one another. Rooms open onto a central piazza, mirroring the central meeting places in the town, and children move freely through the space. This type of openness is conducive to participation and interaction and to the general value of openness to the many differences that children, teachers and community bring with them to the schools – differences of race, religion, sex, language, culture.

¹⁷ Cagliari, P. 'La Storia, Le Ragioni ed I Significati della Partecipazione' in *La Partecipazione: Valori, Significati, Problemi, Strumenti*, I taccuini, No. 2, November 1994. Series of publications published by Centro Documentazione e Ricerca Educativa. Comune di Reggio Emilia, 1994.

¹⁸ Bruner, J., in Ceppi, G and Zini, M (eds), *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children*, Reggio Children, 1998, p. 137.

their learning paths. Furniture is designed to be multi-functional. Screens may be used to allow children to create shadow pictures and stories while at the same time serving as a divider of two spaces. Children are wonderful constructors and take delight in constructing and inhabiting new places. No Reggio school looks the same at the end of the year as it did at the beginning.

The space must be conducive to research and autonomous discovery, both for individual children and for groups of children working together. An enormous amount of attention and effort goes into the design of furniture and organisation of space and materials to maximise the ease of use by the children. The youngest children sleep in cocoon-like open-ended beds that allow them to get in and out independently; art materials in both the central and mini *ateliers* are in see-through containers so that children can easily find things on their own. Mirrors are used in a variety of ways. They hang from the ceiling over changing tables, can be found at floor level and form play apparatus in the form of pyramids that the children can enter to explore the images they become part of. Children therefore gain an understanding of themselves in relation to their surroundings, a belief that is central to the philosophy.

The importance of the aesthetic dimension for learning has already been explained. This is very much in evidence in the schools' physical make-up. These schools are multi-sensory environments, and materials can be displayed in many ways and for different reasons, encouraging children to look at shades and colours and consider how to use them, and to consider textures and smells. These schools are not, however, painted in the bright primary colours that many adults misconceive to be favoured by children. Instead there is a pervasive feeling of light and space brought about by the use of light or white walls and the way in which children's artwork painted on transparent sheets creates interesting layering and diffused light, and the way in which movable walls and wall-size windows allow the interior to integrate with the outside environment. Perhaps again reflecting the centrality of the child and his or her relationship with the school, it is the children themselves who contribute colour through their clothing and belongings, their artwork and sculptures.

The outside environment is also an obvious source of colour and texture, and plants are widely used in the classrooms as well as in interior courtyards. This also serves to create a natural link between the inside and outside environments of the school. Fostering a link with the outside environment is important because a school as a place of learning and discovery cannot be seen to be an island. Rather, within the school children learn how to become full and active participants in the greater, outside environment. A school must nourish an understanding of what is happening 'on the outside'. Outside play areas and equipment are very much in evidence, occasionally forming a physical link between inside and outside, perhaps in the form of canopies and verandas. Through the use of child-built installations such as the Amusement Park for Birds at the Villetta pre-school establishment, the outside becomes a learning centre where children can learn about the elements and physical forces.

It should be said that while there is much evidence of merging indoors and outdoors and bringing the outdoors in, the use of outdoor space in the Reggio Emilia schools is perhaps not as exemplary as one might imagine, considering the favourable climate compared to Scotland, for example. There are undoubtedly cultural reasons for this. Children spend the majority of time indoors during the winter months, even on dry days, largely due to protests from parents that the damp weather is bad for the children. Italian children are always heavily dressed throughout the winter. Consequently outdoor spaces have not always been used as imaginatively as they could be or to their best advantage. However, this is an issue that Reggio educators are very aware of and indeed at the time of writing steps are being taken to look closely at outdoor education and playground culture. The results of this project will undoubtedly have interesting implications at both local and international levels.

The physical environment of the schools is therefore much more than a simple container for learning and teaching. Rather, the environment can be seen to be a central component of the learning and teaching relationship. Indeed, it is easy to see why Reggio educators call the environment 'the third teacher'.