

## INTERVISTA - INTERVIEW

### EDUCATING ATTENTIVE EDUCATORS

*Vito Minoia in dialogue with Lella Gandini*

Lella Gandini, an educator and the author of children's books, moved from Italy to the United States in 1972, managing however to stay in touch with innovative programmes in Italian early childhood education, in particular those implemented in the cities of Reggio Emilia and Pistoia. She has a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree from Smith College and a PhD in Education from the University of Massachusetts where she taught together with two of her professors, George Forman and Carolyn Edwards.

Since 1994 she has been the Liaison for the Dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach in the United States and since 1997 Associate Editor of the magazine *Innovations in Early Childhood Education: The International Reggio Exchange*. As of 2008 she has also been a Visiting Scholar at Lesley University. Her achievements include an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from the Erikson Institute (2004) and the Smith College Medal for Distinguished Alumnae (2008).

The most famous of her books is *The Hundred Languages of Children: the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (1993), co-written with Edwards and Forman.

I met Lella Gandini twice over the past few years, in October 2014, when I was starting my research on the importance of the arts in education at Harvard University and in April 2017, when, thanks to her, the master puppeteer Mariano Dolci and I were invited to hold a training seminar on "Puppets as Tools for Education and Diversity" at the Eric Carle Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Lella Gandini is a major reference point for the Reggio Emilia Approach. Over the years, her work has become increasingly complex, ranging from planning professional training seminars to publishing important books aimed at educators, from organising conferences in various universities to a yearly conference that allows contacts to be established between about 20.000 kindergarten teachers in the United States.

The model set by Loris Malaguzzi's experience in Reggio Emilia cannot be considered just that, but rather a dynamic approach that one can be inspired by. It is an experience in which teachers and students create learning together. The role of the teachers is to offer orientation as real researchers together with the children, always cooperating with their colleagues and with parents, who are considered competent participants in school life. The Reggio approach is inspired by socio-constructivism in which the teachers create educational experiences on the basis of observation and documentation.

It is an approach that has also been well-documented in recent research carried out jointly by educators in Reggio Emilia and the Zero Project researchers from Harvard University's Graduate School. In the book *Making Learning Visible* (Project Zero & Reggio Children 2001), learning is made visible thanks to a documentation and assessment process that takes place during experiences carried out together by teachers and children, using strategies in harmony with the children's interests and the teachers' shared goals.

After graduating from university, Loris Malaguzzi was employed by the municipality as a school psychologist and provided continuity for a popular project started by parents immediately after World War II (events concerning Villa Cella, a village close to the city, where the inhabitants used the bricks of bombed schools to build the walls of new ones, is famous). These parents were moved by a sense of social justice and wanted to improve their living standards after the tragedies of the war. Malaguzzi was certainly inspired by Celestin Freinet's ideas, Jean Piaget's work, the influence of the ideas expressed by Lev Vygotsky, reading books

by John Dewey, at last translated into Italian in the 1950s and not least by his knowledge of the work done by David and Frances Hawkins.

The premise for the pedagogic work developed in Reggio Emilia is that children have great potential and wish to explore, create and learn. By preparing learning spaces filled with possibilities, educators accompany children in their full cognitive development through playful and joyful activities.

In addition to her role as a reference witness of this experience, Lella Gandini has never stopped publishing books for children, concentrating mainly on the documentation of traditional nursery rhymes. Her research of the historical background of traditional lullabies as a means of facilitating sleep for babies and small children is extremely interesting with her discovery of the pre-bedtime separation rituals in different cultural traditions.

Furthermore, one must not forget her important work for childhood programmes in Pistoia (in this case too inspired by Loris Malaguzzi), which she started in 1979, alongside her work linked to Reggio Emilia, and continued to do regularly for at least twenty years. Lella Gandini could be described as a “weaver of the border”, a metaphor used by Margaret Mead in the 1920s to describe the work done by Mrs. Parkinson, when the anthropologist was in the Pacific islands on a research expedition. She is a memorable figure as an informer, a character of that “intermediate culture” or “culture of contact” that is formed by the hybridisation between indigenous cultures and those distant in space and time.

«Lella Gandini’s work has been both that of an anthropologist involved in research and that of a weaver who informs...Both a weaver and a scholar because she has researched and born witness... And since the work of an informer who has the task of connecting also has the characteristics of education, it is worth seeing how Lella has educated “attentive educators». (E. Becchi 2010, pp. 226-229).

Q: Many in Italy remember your first books. To what extent did your passion for children's folklore stimulate and orient your later studies and research?

A: My interest in children's folklore is linked to the post-War period. I was born in 1934 and at the beginning of the 1950s there were boys and girls from various countries who were more or less my age and travelled with their sleeping bags and backpacks in search of the freedom to get to know one another, to learn about events, culture and exchange ideas with others. It was a period in which there was little money available, but a great freedom to move around and get to know others. I did not travel a great deal, but I belonged to a very open-minded scout group in Bergamo, which included girls of all religions and backgrounds. Through that organisations I took part in international gatherings and it was there that I started to add to my collection of nursery rhymes. I had already started doing this in Italian a few years earlier at a local level for my own personal pleasure. It was a collection that became larger and larger. Out of curiosity I collected nursery rhymes from many different countries and in many different languages. I always asked people to write them down for me and would listen to them again with them telling me about them. For years I also corresponded with a number of "pen friends" broadening my international contacts. In addition to enlarging my collection of nursery rhymes, and my small world, it was through these friends that my brother Nino met Kerstin Anderson and now their son Erik Gandini lives in Sweden and makes films such as Videocracy. In the 1970s I started to publish the material I had collected over all those years with a book entitled *99 Filastrocche* in 1972, for Editori Riuniti, as well as the work I had done over the years in various schools with the publishers *Fai da Te* and *Bompiani*. Over the years various collections and new small books of nursery rhymes have been published by *Edizioni Elle* in Trieste.

Q: How important was your meeting with Arno Stern and the liberating aspects of graphic work with painting?

A: I came across the work of Arno Stern in Paris in 1970, where I attended one of his public presentations and bought his books. In 1971 I opened a workshop inspired by Arno Stern's work in my home in Naples, adapting some of the aspects and perhaps providing greater encouragement to children's desire to narrate things through painting, as well as freeing themselves of their fears. Some parents acknowledged a therapeutic element in this, while others saw the beauty and the joy of mixing colours and the pleasure expressed by the children. Once they had finished painting and tidied everything up, these children played with my children who were nine and four years old at the time (they also had a small homemade theatre and puppets) and the work done by the children gave me great satisfaction. I also created temporary Arno Stern-like workshops in various first grades that liked to offer this opportunity on Saturday mornings. I did this in various cities, but especially in Bergamo where my family lived and where we have a small apartment that allows us to feel secure about returning to Italy.

Q: Your arrival in the United States marked another significant moment in your cognitive development. Would you like to discuss this?

A: The life-changing decision to move to the United States, after a new marriage in 1972 with Lester Little, a professor of Medieval History, was made after serious thought. I spoke English since I had spent two years between 1959 and 1961 and in 1969-70 "listening to" courses at various universities there. What I knew, but had not experienced, was that it was possible to enrol (at the age of forty) in regular courses and therefore receive credits for the two years I had studied at the Oriental Institute in Naples. So I followed normal courses at Smith College where I received a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree and continued at the University of Massachusetts where, in 1998, I completed a PhD in Education.

In all this time I obviously put to good use everything I knew and that I continued to update in my yearly trips to Italy, with the intention of offering to others the experience gained in Reggio

Emilia and Pistoia since it was obvious that there was a great need to communicate all this and make it visible, understandable and applicable to the educational reality available to small children in this great country, starting with the New England state I live in. Considering my husband's historical research, sabbatical years and appointments he received to direct American cultural institutes in Italy, such as the American Academy in Rome, we have practically lived in two countries and my children, both now professors too, are perfectly bilingual. What remains uncertain is how this opportunity can be nurtured for the grandchildren.

Q: Let us address the encounter with Reggio Emilia, with Loris Malaguzzi's experience and your incessant search for beauty to be fostered by activating cognitive paths with children in kindergartens, but also younger ones in crèches. How did this encounter come about and what were the developments as far as your work was concerned?

A: I came into contact with schools in Reggio Emilia during the same period in which I met Loris Malaguzzi in 1976. I had visited the kindergartens in Bologna created and organised by Bruno Ciari. That was my first encounter with progressive schools in those years and I also followed all publications on the subject. But in 1976 I had the now enviable freedom to enter these schools and spend time watching for entire days, especially in the Diana and Villetta schools. I had a chance to ask questions and tape the teachers' answers. The same was possible at the Arcobaleno crèche. Mariano Dolci was very active at the time and for a number of years. For me it was an education and a preparation that continued and is now part of my intellectual, pedagogic and creative growth. All in all it is my great Finishing School.

Q: Malaguzzi knew about John Dewey's educational ideas and had been interested in a great deal of research concerning the psychology of childhood developed in the United States; what were these ideas?

A: My face-to-face meeting with Loris Malaguzzi and Reggio Emilia took place in 1976 when the magazine *Zerosei* was founded. Ferruccio Cremaschi knew about my work on nursery rhymes as well as my creative work with children and children's books that I had published with Edizioni Emme in cooperation with Carlo de Simone, Laura Mancini and the photographer Fabio Donato. He came to my house, looking for me, and asked if he could include some of the traditional nursery rhymes in the first issue of *Zerosei Journal*. I contributed with pleasure without knowing, however, that Loris Malaguzzi frankly did not like these rhymes precisely because they reminded him of the traditional kindergartens for children that he opposed. When we got to know one another better, he realised that I was not dangerous and could contribute to the magazine with interviews I had done in the United States. So we became friends; as he requested, I interviewed various experts who had also assumed a position against the war in Vietnam, people like Benjamin Spock, T. Berry Brazelton, Jerome Bruner (who later became an honorary citizen of Reggio Emilia), David Elkind, Hans Furth and Howard Gardner, whom I accompanied on his first visit to Reggio and who then became another regular visitor.

Q: Which aspects of Malaguzzi's work caused such great interest in the United States? You have mentioned Jerome Bruner or Howard Gardner who wished to get to know better the work done in Reggio Emilia.

A: Interest in the research and application or transferral of Loris Malaguzzi's ideas that university professors have spread in infant-toddler centres, continues to expand in the United States and in particular also in Canada where there are advanced research groups in the Toronto area, for example, implementing structural changes at pre-school level after one of the ministers visited the schools in Reggio Emilia with a group of professors.

There are many pre-schools in the United States that describe themselves as "Reggio inspired". On the other hand, conservatives in the United States education sector continue to reiterate the need

for compulsory tests even for toddlers, which involves a huge effort both for the teachers and the children.

Q: Gardner and those working with him at Harvard University have, in particular, created the expression “making learning visible” based exactly on the enhancement of the work developed in Reggio Emilia. Could you tell us a little more about this concept?

A: The Harvard University research group that had published “Making Learning Visible” together with educators in Reggio Emilia is still very active.

Considerations concerning how the documentation of the children’s working group was essential for making learning visible (rather than resorting to texts) and how important it was to move from a model of transmitting knowledge to an orientation involving research and discovery with the children, resulted in research that showed how documentation makes it possible to offer a learning method both to children and teachers. At Harvard this group continues to offer refresher courses for teachers during the summer and two members of the original research group in Reggio Emilia, Mara Krechevsky and Ben Mardell, as well as Melissa Rivaud and Daniel Wilson, published a book in 2013 entitled *Visible Learners: Promoting Reggio-Inspired Approaches in all Schools* (from pre-school to high school).

Q: Could you briefly remind us of a few episodes linked to the various conferences you attended together with Malaguzzi in different American universities and educational contexts?

A: Loris Malaguzzi had been invited by Carolyn Edwards, at the time a professor at the University of Massachusetts, because she had managed to obtain the faculty’s support and in particular that of Professor George Forman, a researcher of cognitive learning, to host the exhibition called “The Hundred Languages of Children” in December 1988. I was working with these professors on the final thesis for my doctorate in education and it was a privilege for me to be their translator (as I had been at times in Reggio for English-language visitors). It was also a great pleasure for me

and my husband Lester Little, a professor of history at another college here in New England, to have Loris Malaguzzi as our guest. On that occasion it became clear that Malaguzzi had a great ability in communicating with the public and especially greatly enjoyed making visible the intelligence of children. This was clear both when he spoke to the entire faculty in the university's main auditorium and later, when he presented for an hour and a half to a class of 30 students, a brief story that he narrated using images from the research done by a little boy in the crèche. The little boy was ten months old and balancing a cardboard tube in which he placed felt-tip pens. That is the famous mini-story about Francesco and the tube.

In addition to this experience in Massachusetts, Loris Malaguzzi had come for the first time to the United States in 1987 to accompany the exhibition to San Francisco (California) and had been invited in the following years to two important places for promoting his educational programme for children, teachers and parents. He was invited to Chicago to receive the prestigious Khol Prize and visit schools inspired by John Dewey, and to Washington DC, where the museum for children in the capital had opened a school inspired to the "Reggio approach" and where a teacher from Reggio Emilia, Amelia Gambetti, implemented the programme, educating the teachers on this new way of learning with children. I was also present on both occasions as Malaguzzi's interpreter and translator.

There is a video of the event in Chicago and it is now part of the exhibition "The Hundred Languages of Children" and in Washington a film was made by a director from Reggio Emilia. For me there is one particularly pleasant and interesting incident linked to these personal encounters with Malaguzzi. When he was staying with us in Northampton, Massachusetts, he had discovered that my husband and I were good friends with the philosopher and educator David Hawkins. Malaguzzi, who admired his books, was amazed that he was still alive, so we called David and Loris spoke to him (David spoke Italian) and immediately invited him to visit the schools in Reggio. This telephone conversation was followed

by a face-to-face meeting as David Hawkins came to Washington to meet with Malaguzzi and listen to his presentation. During the presentation on children's experience with shadows, at the end David Hawkins made some very positive comments about this experience, but then added loudly, "Malaguzzi I see the children but where are the teachers?" And Malaguzzi equally emphatically answered, "Hawkins, the teachers are in the shadows of course!"

Q: You are now the "Liaison for the Dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach" in the United States. Could you explain to us how this dissemination work is implemented and how you manage to promote and stimulate new cognitive processes?

A: Many years ago I started to take images of the schools in Reggio Emilia and to explain how children learned thanks to their spontaneous desire and were supported by the teachers, who made available interesting and natural or unusual material. They also provided welcoming places and consider children as interested in exploring and discovering, and, above all, documenting their empathic, observant and constructive way of being with children, also for the parents and for those wishing to learn with them and for them.

Q: You have shown me a few editions of the review called "Innovations in Early Education", a four-monthly publication of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance. How is it organised and what initiatives does it result in? What are the main objectives of this magazine and what are those of the Association?

A: There are many pre-schools in the United States that call themselves "Reggio inspired". I remember an article that analysed this dissemination, published a couple of years ago by "Innovations in Education; The International Reggio Emilia Exchange". This is a magazine that for years has been published by Judy Kaminsky and with me as an associate publisher. This publication arose from an agreement entered into by Malaguzzi in 1990 during his visit to Washington, with Eli Saltz, a professor and the director of the Merrill Palmer Institute at Wayne State University. He is a

researcher who supports teachers. The first number was published in 1992 and more recently the magazine has been published in a new format by NAREA, the North American Reggio Alliance, the association of educators who support the research and dissemination of the Reggio Emilia approach. On the other hand, conservatives in the United States education sector continue to reiterate the need for compulsory tests even for toddlers, which involves a huge effort both for the teachers and the children.

Q: Can one compare the influence nowadays exercised by Loris Malaguzzi's pedagogic ideas in the United States to the interest there once was for the methods of Maria Montessori?

A: Decidedly yes. The interest is very similar to that expressed for the Montessori schools and method and it is an interesting phenomenon to observe so as to avoid history repeating itself. This because there was the idea to try and certify those schools that really respected Maria Montessori's ideas and methods and this led to competition rather than cooperation between the different Montessori groups, creating many interpretations and at times divisions that would have saddened Maria Montessori, to say the least.

Q: Broadly speaking and very briefly, how does the education system differ in the various American states? There is a broad and open debate nowadays in the United States concerning the purpose and importance of learning tests to which didactics must often yield in the name of efficiency (a debate that is also very lively in Italy). In your opinion, what alternative role could the arts play in education?

A: The federal government's attempt to establish national standards in state schools is very recent and greatly opposed. Some states have, in fact, requested and received exemption from these standards. The main form of control lies at state level but also at an individual level within the states. Whatever the standards may be or the quality of the education programme, or at least as far as what is measured is concerned, "the student's competence" de-

pends significantly on the respective wealth or poverty of each city or town. In spite of the fact that states contribute to public schools, it is local tax on homes and commercial buildings that provides the most significant contribution. There is a great mix of poor and wealthy in the big cities, while in the many small towns with few prospects of development, schools tend to be weaker. In the suburbs of large cities like Boston and New York, there tend to be wealthy families and consequently state schools are of a high quality.

Q: What educational role can one reserve to the theatre in early infancy and in the education of people in general?

A: In general, more than considering the theatre as encouragement, in pre-schools in the more advanced centres, importance is attributed to children verbally expressing themselves, their thoughts or ideas or when narrating an invented story. In primary schools, this can apply to a story that has been read or the role of a character.

In middle schools and high schools, one instead cultivates the idea of preparing plays also accompanied by music, helping groups of children learning to play musical instruments and performing together. There is almost always a theatre, albeit a small one or a special area, in all state schools. It is probably one of the most satisfying end-of-school events for many children from all backgrounds.

Q: You took me to visit the Eric Carle Museum, created here in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 2002 by the famous author and illustrator of children's books, who was freely inspired by the work done in Reggio Emilia, re-contextualising it. What are the educational principles that guide the museum and neighbouring Hampshire College that is part of the Hampshire College Cultural Village, which you told me is inspired by a progressive idea as far as the training of teachers is concerned?

A: The Eric Carle Museum, built on land that was part of Hampshire College, a progressive university where the students'

(those who have finished high school) study-programme is organised by a group of professors and the student, creating what is effectively an individual work, study and research plan.

Q: There are many publications you have curated here in the United States, often in cooperation with successful scholars of early childhood education. Which is the one you like best and what are your current study interests and books you are planning to publish in the near future?

A: The book is the one written together with Carolyn Edwards and George Forman: *The Hundred Languages of Children*. Published in 1993 also containing my interview with Loris Malaguzzi, it is at its third edition in English and has been even translated into Chinese, Greek and Arabic. But perhaps I am equally fond of a book written and published with another group of authors, (that is my favourite way of writing), about the workshop in Reggio Emilia, with an important contribution by Veà Vecchi. As you can see, what was created and continues to evolve in Reggio Emilia is a fundamental source of reflection and hope as far as the education of children and adults is concerned.

### References

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