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Partner, Teacher, and Guide:
Examples of Teacher Behavior in Reggio Emilia

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Following is an excerpt from a chapter on the role of the teacher in Reggio Emilia, Italy, published in the second edition of the following book. A revised chapter, with new examples, is to be published in the third edition. This material is fully copyrighted to Pearson Publishing, a division of ABC – CLIO.

The Hundred Languages of Children, Second Edition: The Reggio Emilia Approach, Advanced Reflections, edited by Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman. Greenwich, Conn.: Ablex, 1998, pp. 191-197.

EXAMPLES OF TEACHER BEHAVIOR

To give a fuller picture and provide concrete examples of the abstract principles presented above, we offer four short observation records drawn from videotapes taken at the Diana School in 1988 and 1990. They illustrate different kinds of teacher behavior commonly seen in the Reggio Emilia preprimary schools.

The Teacher Gets Children Started

In this episode (May 24, 1988, videotape taken by research team), teacher Giulia Notari acts as "dispenser of occasions" in helping children make the transition from morning group meeting to their first activity. Notice her flexibility and nurturance in meeting the needs of one

little girl who is not ready to enter into a focused activity.

It is 9:23 a.m. in the 3-year-old classroom, and morning meeting has just ended. During this meeting, teacher Giulia Notari has told the whole class about the morning's activities, all of which concern the theme of Springtime that they are currently pursuing. Then her co-teacher, Paola Strozzi, departs with eight children to work with clay in the school's central *piazza*. Giulia supervises the remaining 12 or so children. She moves around the classroom encouraging children to settle into an activity, and she spends a few moments with each small group in turn getting them started. For instance, at one table she introduces a group of four children to the materials set there, "Feel it, this paper is different from other paper."

"It is cold," a child says.

"It is cold," she agrees. "It is cold. And here is another paper that is still different. And look, here are markers, chalks, and craypas, all yellow."

As she moves from one table to the next, Giulia sees children not yet involved and asks, "Do you want to work with the green colors in the little *atelier*? Or do you want to cut with scissors and use glue?"

She comes to a small table, where two children sit facing sheets of white paper and little baskets full of leaves, grass, and flowers picked earlier that morning. Giulia says, "Do you see what is here? Little bits of green that you found. And flowers that you picked. You can place them on the paper as you like. If one piece of paper is not enough, you can place a second right next to it. Okay?" (Giulia explains later that the activity communicates the importance and pleasure of exploration and helps the children become accustomed to collage). As Giulia moves off, the two children proceed happily, chatting with each other.

"Do you want this?" "I've taken that kind, too." "Look how pretty this is." "Take your time" (this is obviously an imitation of something the teacher sometimes says). At 9:26, Giulia returns to look and admire their work, saying, "I like it very much. You can use extra sheets of paper. If you want something, tell me."

At 9:28 she enters a small room which is an annex to the classroom. Two girls are seated at a table there. One is drawing with markers. Giulia Notari gives this first girl more drawing materials, then goes to the second one.

"Well, then, shall we look for the work you have already started? Let's see where it is." She takes a folder out of a drawer and begins leafing slowly through it, saying "Which one is yours? Which one? Which one? Which one?" The child looks despondent and does not answer. They eventually locate the child's drawing, then Giulia says, "What does this need? Do you need some more black marker to continue?... Do you want to work on another drawing?. Do you want another paper to go work with the glue? Would you like to go and play? Love, what do you want to do?" The despondent child does not answer any of her questions. Finally the teacher simply crouches down, kisses her, and talks with her gently. Then she takes down some picture books from a high shelf and puts away the drawing. Another child appears in the doorway looking for help, and Giulia says, "I'm coming, sweetheart." She leaves the little girl wiping away her tears and looking through a book. As she goes by, she stops to praise the drawing of the first little girl.

The Teacher Provides Instruction in Tool-Use and Technique

It is now 9:34 on the same morning (May 24, 1988), in the large shared space (piazza) where co-teacher Paola Notari is working with eight 3-year-olds and large mounds of artists'

modeling clay. She provides the children instruction in the correct use of the materials and tools as part of the process of facilitating, supporting, and encouraging. When asked about this, she says she tries to provide the help and advice that is needed for children to accomplish their own artistic and representational goals and not be defeated by the materials. For example, she knows that if children roll out the clay too thin, then it breaks during firing and children are upset.

The children are seated around a long rectangular table, while Paola stands and moves among them. In front of each is a large wooden tablet on which to work the clay. Paola is preparing each child a flat slab of clay: she tears off a hunk of clay, rolls it out thin with a rolling pin, cuts off the sides to make a neat square, then gives it out. She is using a knife to cut the clay and says, "This tool we can use to cut the clay when it is nice and thick."

The children have many cutting and rolling tools nearby. They are working on the problem of "representing movement, on a surface." With a knife, they can cut out a piece of the clay, then fold it up and over to give a sense of motion on the surface of the slab. (She explains later that some of the children's don't actually succeed in getting any sense of movement into theirs. But Paola doesn't interfere and insist on her idea of movement. Since all are very involved in what they are doing, she does not impose her ideas on them. However, she does instruct them on matters of technique--showing them how to roll and cut the clay and use the tools.) At 9:34 Paola Notari is seen using a spatula to give a newly rolled slab of clay to a child. "Do you need this?" she asks. She tells another, "You are pressing too much. If you press too much, we will not be able to pick it up, and then we will not be able to fire it in the kiln. Don't press too hard." Then another child turns to her, "Is this all right?"

"Yes, yes," Paola replies, "That's fine. If you want another slab of clay, I can prepare one for you."

She observes a little disagreement between two children. One wants the pastry cutter that the other has been using. That child protests, "This is mine. I had it before."

"But they are all the same," says Paola, pointing out more cutters. "They really are all the same." She moves closer and the first child shows her that in fact the desired cutter makes a different kind of track in the clay than the others. So she revises her opinion, "Oh, I see. Well, if you look in the tool box, there you will find another, precisely like this one." The child goes off happily to look.

She begins to prepare a slab of clay for one of the girls, and while doing so, looks up at the child opposite her. "What are you doing?" she asks. The boy shows, and Paola says, "That's nice."

Finishing the new slab, she takes it over to the girl needing it. Seeing her first piece, Paola comments, "Look at that marvel! Now you have to think about what else you want to do. You could put the same marks in it [the new slab] you did before. Of you could place these pieces folded, or standing up." She demonstrates, using little strips of clay. The little girl has in her hand a pastry cutter, which she moves over the slab without saying anything. Paola continues, "You only want to cut with this little wheel, don't you? It does make very beautiful marks."

Paola goes to the opposite side of the table where a very small child seems to be having difficulties. She asks him, "May I clean it up for you?" Her hand smooths down his slab, using slip. She explains to him, "This is sort of like an eraser. And now I will show you how to use this tool [a cutter]. You can make a thin strip, like this, and fold it

or pick it up." She shows him to lift one end of the strip. Then she puts the cutter into his hand and standing behind him, guides him in the use of both his hands. "With this hand, hold the clay. Now with this other hand, push very hard. More. This way. Okay? Now you can do it."

At 9:41 she asks all the children at large, "Do you want more clay? I can go get it."

"Also I!" "Also I!" shout all the children.

"Okay," Paola says, "I'm going to get some more." She goes out of the room for a few minutes, leaving the children alone for a few moments. The observation continues in the same way when she returns.

The Teacher Turns a Dispute into a Hypothesis to Test

It is 9:12 on a morning late in May (1990, videotape taken by research team), and teacher Laura Rubizzi sits with six 5-year-old children at a table in a small room off the atelier. Her group is involved in a project to prepare an "instruction booklet" about their school to send to the homes of those small children who will be entering the Diana School next fall. The group of three boys and three girls has decided, among other things, to include in the welcome booklet some directions for how to find the way to the atelier.

But how to communicate those directions? In a discussion that had taken place on the previous day, one girl, Giulia, had proposed that since little children can't read, the group should instead draw them a picture. But Silvio then asserted that little children speak differently than big ones do, so they should write their instructions in "scribbles" to speak the language of 3-year-olds. The others strongly disagreed! A scribble picture would be no good!

Laura had made a constructive suggestion, that the children draw both kinds of pictures and see which one worked better. So at the end of their time yesterday, the children had prepared two pictures. Silvio drew his scribble diagram, while Giulia drew a picture of a child playing on the video machine in this small room next to the *atelier*. To test which picture communicates better, the group of six proposes to enter the classroom of the smallest children in the Diana School and ask them, "Which picture do you prefer? Which do you understand?" Cristina, another of the girls, notes that they should show the picture to a group of children containing an equal number of boys and girls, because the girls will understand Giulia's picture better, while the boys will understand Silvio's.

Thus, at 9:18 we see the six 5-year-olds standing with Laura Rubizzi at the head of the circle where are seated all of the children in the 3-year-old classroom, along with their teachers, Paola Strozzi and Giulia Notari. Notice how the teachers cooperate to highlight the interesting problem to resolve through comparison of ideas, and how Laura, without heightening or calling attention to possibilities of hurt feelings, nevertheless offers Silvio nurturance at a potentially sensitive moment.

Laura tells the expectant 3-year-olds, "We have a big, big problem." The child, Giulia, begins to explain how they need to find out what pictures work best with 3-year-olds; Laura takes over and standing close to Giulia, looking at her, echoes and inserts points to make the explanation clearer. Then teacher, Giulia Notari, looking around at the faces of her 3-year-old group, speaks as if for them, again repeating the main points. As she finishes, voices are heard all around the circle as the 3-year-olds chime in their initial opinions.

Teacher Laura takes her six 5-year-olds into a huddle to work out a game plan for how to proceed next. Then, with her help, they get ready: Silvio and Giulia stand at the head of the children's circle, excitedly holding their pictures. Laura says that the 3-year-olds will come up, study the two pictures, decide which communicates best, then stand behind the boy or girl holding that picture. To the side of Silvio and Giulia, at right angles to the circle, stand the remaining 5-year-olds; their job will be to decide which line of children turns out to be longest.

Giulia Notari selects, one by one, individual 3-year-olds to go up. One boy goes forward, studies the pictures, points to Silvio's, then with teacher help takes his place behind Silvio. Another boy comes up, points to Giulia's picture, then returns to his seat, although his teacher tells him to go stand behind her. The next child to go up also points to Giulia's picture and does then correctly go to stand behind Giulia. Now the system is working. Another boy goes to stand behind Silvio; then the next four children select Giulia's picture and take their places behind her.

At this point, teacher Laura, decides the case has been made and she should intervene. "Very good," she states, then looking at her little group of judges, "Children of the group! This is the line of those who select the scribble drawing, and this is the line of those who select the other drawing. According to you, which line is longer?" The group points decisively to Giulia's line. "This one!" they say.

It is now 9:26. Laura bends over and speaks directly to Silvio alone. Then she straightens up and says, "Okay! Thank you very much! We'll return to

our room," and off they go.

As the 5-year-olds take their seats and begin to discuss drawing a map of their school for the booklet, everyone, including Silvio, seems equally cheerful and involved.

The Teacher Encourages Children to Solve Their Own Disputes

It is just before lunchtime (Spring, 1990, videotape taken by staff of the Diana School), and two 5-year-old boys, Daniele and Christian, are setting the tables for their class. In this school, children of each succeeding age are given more responsibility in preparing the table for lunch. The 5-year-olds take turns at deciding who is to sit where. The Diana School teachers believe that their system of letting a few children each day set the table and decide upon the seating arrangement, works better and is more in line with their philosophy than either having a fixed seating order (controlled by the teachers) or allowing free choice for everyone at the moment of seating themselves.

Daniele and Christian lay out the tablecloths, plates, and silverware, and decide where everyone is to sit by placing their individual napkins (each in a little envelope with the name sewn on). As they work, another boy comes in and asks to be seated near a certain boy. The table setters agree, and he leaves. Then a girl, Elisa, comes in and asks, "With whom did you put me?" Daniele answers, "Look for yourself." She says, "Well, Daniele, don't you want to tell me where you put me?"

In the meanwhile other children have come in. It is difficult to follow exactly what they say, as they are struggling with the caps on the mineral water

bottles. This distracts Daniele and Christian from Elisa's request. Eventually Daniele says, showing her one of the napkin envelopes, "Is this yours?" She replies yes. Christian comments, "Near Michele." This obviously displeases Elisa, who protests, "And I don't like it."

The teacher, Giulia, enters, and observes the dispute. Daniele asks Elisa, "You don't want to stay near Michele?" She says, "NO! Finally, you do understand!"

Giulia glances toward the second teacher, who is silently videotaping the scene, and makes a decision not to intervene. "Find an agreement among yourselves," she tells the children, "Elisa, find an agreement with them." She returns to the next room. Christian seeks to find out with whom Elisa wants to sit, then explains to her that she must sit where they placed her. She cries out, "All right!" and leaves, mad, stamping her feet and slamming the door. Christian runs after her, calling her name, and bringing her back into the classroom. He asks twice, "Do you want to sit near Maria Giulia?" She remains angry. "Do what you like!" she shouts. (Later, in discussing this situation, teacher Giulia Notari stated that she thought it appropriate to minimize this situation and let the children take care of it themselves. Elisa often has such reactions, she noted, and it was not really a very painful situation for her.)