

Designing Environments that Engage

an exploration of possibilities
with Margie Carter



Engaging children

- ✓ in relationships
- ✓ in imaginative explorations
- ✓ and the generation of ideas and theories

Considering provocative materials and a programme culture that promotes an excitement about learning.

Creating a Culture of Intellectual Vitality

My school is a behavior school. The only thing they teach you is how to behave. If you already know that, it's really boring.

Jesse Jayden Carter, 2009

The content of the relationships between our teachers and their pupils tends to be dominated by information about the child's conduct and level of performance.....We tend to over-estimate children academically and under-estimate them academically...A program has intellectual vitality if the teacher's individual and group interactions are mainly about what the children are learning, planning, and thinking about, plus their interest in each other, and only minimally about the rules and routines.

Lilian Katz (1998) In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, G. Forman, *The Hundred Languages of Children*.

The environment is the most visible aspect of the work done in the schools by all the protagonists. It conveys the message that this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and instructive power of space.

Lella Gandini (2002) In V. Fu, A. Stremmel, L. Hill, *Teaching and Learning. Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach*.

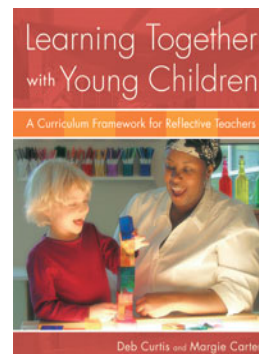
The materials have their own inner life and their own story to tell. Yet they can be transformed only through their encounter with people.

When we leave room in construction with materials, leave silence or pause or breathing room, that helps the materials themselves to express what they can express.

Elena Giacomini (2005) *Innovations in Early Education 12, no. 3*

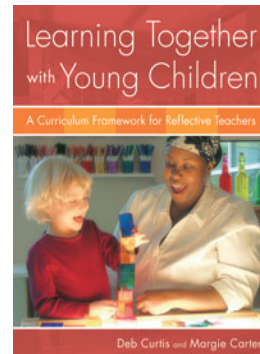
Consider elements and possibilities in materials

- ✓ Select materials with a view of the competent child
- ✓ Draw on the aesthetic qualities of materials
- ✓ Invent new possibilities for familiar materials
- ✓ Choose materials that can be transformed
- ✓ Provide real tools and high quality materials
- ✓ Add additional materials to extend children's interests and provoke new possibilities
- ✓ Combine materials with layers of possibilities for complex play



Principles for arranging materials as invitations for focus and engagement

- ✓ Create orderly arrangements to provoke wonder and curiosity
- ✓ Provide a background for the materials
- ✓ Store diverse items in matching containers
- ✓ Group similar materials with different attributes
- ✓ Give attention to size, scale and levels
- ✓ Arrange materials to suggest how they might be used
- ✓ Reposition materials to spark a new interest
- ✓ Display books and other visual representations with the materials
- ✓ Offer collections of materials to highlight a learning domain



Learning from the Masters



Friedrich Froebel created materials for children which he called "gifts".



Maria Montessori designed a set of materials and a style of presentation to match the way children learn.

Possible Next Step

Make a research of, and document, any part of your life at school that you feel compelled to know more about, especially your environment and the children's use of materials.

Document what the children do and what you do. Interpret this documentation with the teachers and use your findings to guide further decisions. This cycle of observation, documentation, interpretation can be a very powerful catalyst for change.

Charles Schwab The Atelier Environment. Recognizing the Power of Materials as a Language In J. Hendrick (2004) *Next Steps to Teaching the Reggio Way. Accepting the Challenge to Change.*

Developing Your Programme Culture

Every classroom has a culture- a set of expectations, language, routines, and ways to being together that shapes the group's identity. The culture you develop sets the tone, reflects who you are, and expresses how you want to learn and live with children.

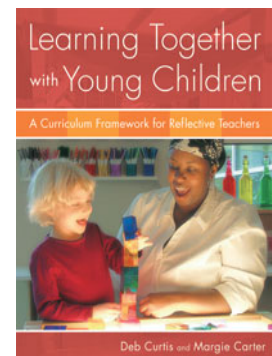
Deb Curtis and Margie Carter (2008) *Learning Together with Young Children*

School schedules and teaching strategies need to fit children's natural rhythms rather than trying (and failing) to force them into an artificially adult world which mimics our fast paced, hard-driving business culture.....We need to stop hurrying children. Our school days require time. Time to wonder, time to pause, time to look closely, time to share, time to pay attention to what is most important.

Chip Wood (1999) *Time to Teach, Time to Learn: Changing the Pace of School*

Elements of a programme culture that promotes excitement and engagement with learning (routines of the social/emotional/intellectual environment)

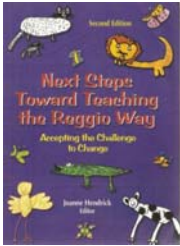
- ✓ Focus on relationships, not rules
- ✓ Provide time to wonder, pause, pay attention
- ✓ Give children ownership of routines and schedules
- ✓ Coach children to develop negotiation and collaboration skills
- ✓ Coach children to use tools and materials
- ✓ Create a studio space for investigations
- ✓ Develop a protocol of re-representing ideas "to get smarter"
- ✓ Ask questions which help children uncover their theories and reflect on their learning
- ✓ Help children see themselves as teachers



Considering Art as a Thinking Tool

Because objects of art are expressive, they are a language. Each art has its own medium and that medium is especially fitted for one kind of communication.

John Dewey (1934/2005) *Art as Experience*

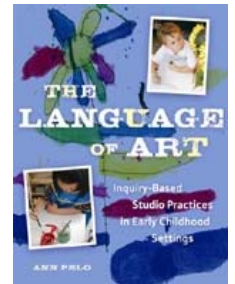


The language of art, materials which communicate through senses, are often devalued in relation to the spoken and written word. Children interact with materials to communicate a wide range of ideas and feelings. This becomes a pedagogical resource for their inquiry.

Charles Schwall (2004) *The Atelier Environment. Recognizing the Power of Materials as a Language* In J. Hendrick *Next Steps to Teaching the Reggio Way. Accepting the Challenge to Change.*

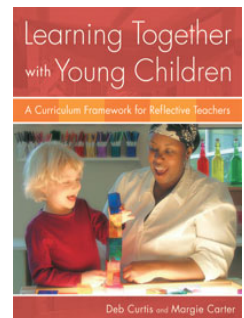
The art explorations that we offer children in the studio give children fluency with art media. The children carry this fluency into their work and play in the classroom. Art spills out of the studio and into the children's lives, as the language of art becomes the language of learning. Art can become a tool for investigating, asking questions, forming and testing theories, collaborating, and exploring an idea from a range of perspectives—art can grow a culture of inquiry in our programs.

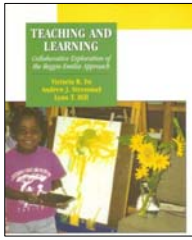
Ann Pelo (2007) *The Language of Art. Inquiry-Based Studio Practices in Early Childhood Settings.*



Helping children learn about learning and generate theories

- ✓ When you want to get smarter about something, look closely at what you have done and think about your ideas.
- ✓ You can tell someone your ideas through a conversation, through dictation, or by creating a story.
- ✓ You can teach someone what you know or the steps you followed.
- ✓ Writing ideas on a chart or in a book reminds us what we have been learning. We can come back to these ideas again without having to start from scratch.
- ✓ Another way to get smart is to create drawings of our ideas.
- ✓ We can use different materials to explore the same idea or better understand our theories about something.
- ✓ Inviting others to join us in thinking will make us smarter.
- ✓ Our friends, our families, people in the community or books might give us more ways to think about our ideas.





Asking children to explain their drawings encourages them to work with deliberation and forethought. We often look for the child's unspoken theory and bring it to the surface where it can be exposed, articulated, and explored. I listen for motivation, interest, cognitive knots and inconsistencies in thinking.

Alise Shafer Ordinary Moments, Extraordinary Possibilities. In V. Fu, A. Stremmel, L. Hill (2002) *Teaching and Learning. Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach*

Meeting children's minds with a pedagogy of listening

Our minds are tuned to two vital mantras, one an assumption, one a question.

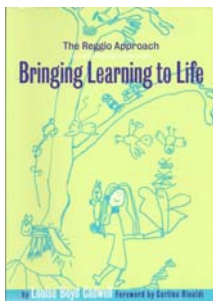
Assumption: Children are powerful thinkers.

Question: What is the child's intent?

We want to listen not only with the goal of hearing what the child is saying, but also mindful of the possibility she is seeking meaning beyond her words.

Pam Oken-Wright and Marty Gravett Big Ideas and the Essence of Intent In V. Fu, A. Stremmel, L. Hill (2002) *Teaching and Learning. Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach.*

Becoming a Community of Seekers



We want to know what the children think, feel, and wonder. We believe that the children will have things to tell each other and us that we have never heard before. We are always listening for a surprise and the birth of a new idea. This practice supports a searching together for new meaning. Together we become a community of seekers.

Louise Boyd Cadwell (2003) *Bringing Learning to Life*

Stay in touch with Margie and Deb's work by visiting www.ecetrainers.com