Play and the Hundred Languages of Children

An Interview with Lella Gandini

A student of children's folkways, Italian author and teacher Lella Gandini is best known in the United States as the leading advocate for the Reggio Emilia approach to early-childhood education, which emerged after the Second World War in Northern Italy—in the town that gives this approach its name. Gandini's many publications in English and Italian include volumes on early-childhood education and Italian folklore, and she is coauthor or coeditor of such works as *Insights and Inspirations from Reggio Emilia: Stories of Teachers and Children from North America*; *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*; and *Beautiful Stuff!: Learning with Found Materials*. She holds a doctorate in education and has taught at the University of Massachusetts, Lesley College, and Smith College. In this interview, Gandini discusses how teachers and children in Reggio schools make thinking visible as they draw, sculpt, tell stories, construct theories, make maps, compose poetry, and explore their creativity in dramatic play. **Key words:** Alliance for Childhood; bedtime ritual; *cantilene,* Eric Carle; Bruno Ciari; *filastrocche*; Loris Malaguzzi; Don Milani; Montessori method; National Association for the Education of Young Children; Reggio Emilia

American Journal of Play: Professor Gandini, you are widely regarded as the point person in the United States for the Reggio Emilia approach to learning. What does that role entail for you?

Lella Gandini: "Professor Gandini" feels a little strange to me; however, I like being designated as "point person" rather than the formal title invented for me several years ago: Liaison for the Dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach. That emerged when colleagues and I were trying to define the work I do to increase knowledge about programs for young children in the Reggio Emilia approach in this country.

As for what I do, through the years, this work has become more and more complex. For example, I design and conduct professional-development meetings and workshops. I give talks at conferences. I participate with educators from Reggio Emilia in the National Association for the Education of Young Children annual conference that connects about twenty thousand teachers of young children. I lecture in colleges. I write articles. I am associate editor of a small journal about the Reggio Emilia approach. I plan, edit,

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and write books with colleagues. I visit schools and classrooms. I consult with directors and teachers. The best outcomes occur when the exchange extends over a period of time and becomes a regular engagement that helps construct reciprocal learning.

AJP: The number of schools inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach for learning is on the rise in the United States, but not everyone knows what the Reggio approach is. How do you briefly describe it to those not familiar with it?

Gandini: I like to say that it is better not to consider the Reggio Emilia approach a model but rather to consider how the dynamic approach developed in Reggio can offer inspiration.

An essential element for positive learning and teaching in the Reggio Emilia approach is to view children and teachers as endowed with strong potential, ready to enter into relationships, ready to be listened to, and eager to learn. Once we value children and teachers this way, teaching cannot be done only through imparting information, but rather, it has to be an experience in which teachers and learners construct learning together. Teachers have the task of giving orientation, meaning, and value to the experience of schools and children. The role of the teacher is seen as that of researcher in collaboration with colleagues, as well as in relationship and communication with parents who are considered competent participants in the life of the school rather than consumers. Reggio teachers encourage parents to be connected with the community that supports the school.

AJP: Both the Montessori methodology and the Reggio approach came out of twentieth-century Italy. How do these two well-known pedagogies differ from each other? Do the differences arise from their different spots in the history of the century or from a different philosophy at the root of each?

Gandini: The differences between the Montessori method and the Reggio Emilia approach are connected with both their histories and their philosophical roots. There are, however, certainly common aspects. The first of these is great respect for the child as a person and the child as a thinker. Another is focus on the beauty and richness in materials in the environment. Maria Montessori spoke of the prepared environment for children's learning, while in Reggio Emilia, the environment is considered the third teacher, after the two teachers who are in charge of a classroom of twenty-six children. Where Montessori and Reggio diverge is above all in how they view the role of the teacher. In Reggio the teacher is considered a researcher along with the children, and the children's relationship with each other,

with the teachers, and with the environment is also considered essential in supporting learning. Furthermore, in Reggio the creative element of children's interactions with many open-ended materials is quite different from Montessori, where beautiful materials well designed by Maria Montessori have specific, instructive goals. Socio-constructivism is part of the inspiration in Reggio. Although, in both learning approaches, teachers are supposed to be thoughtful observers, teachers in Reggio construct the experiences of children on the basis of observation and documentation, while the teacher in a traditional Montessori method follows steps in offering the prepared materials and sees that the children use them in the expected sequence.

AJP: Tell us more about how and why the Reggio Emilia approach evolved after World War II? What were the practical circumstances that encouraged the people of the town to approach early-childhood education this way?

Gandini: The beginning of these schools for young children in Reggio is more connected with desire for survival and an impetus toward improving the lives of young children, especially, after a cruel war and at the end of the fascist regime, which had led people in Italy also to fight with each other. There is a story told by Loris Malaguzzi, the individual most responsible for establishing the schools of Reggio; let me paraphrase as I read what he said in a piece called "When We Got the News" in a book by Renzo Barazzoni titled *Brick by Brick: The History of the "XXV Aprile" People's Nursery School of Villa Cella* (2000), 13–15. Malaguzzi said:

> Word had it that at Villa Cella (a village outside city) the people had gotten together to put up a school for the young children; they had pulled out the bricks from the bombed-out houses and had used them to build the walls of the school. I rode on my bicycle to Villa Cella. The news was true, and the truth was there, for all to see on this sunny spring day . . . these people, without a penny to their names, with no technical offices, building permits, site directors, inspectors from the Ministry of Education, could actually build a school with their own strength, brick by brick, was a paradox. I was excited by the way it all overturned logic and prejudices, the old rules governing pedagogy, culture, how it forced everything back to the beginning. It opened up completely new horizons of thought.

> I sensed that it was a formidable lesson of humanity and culture that would generate other extraordinary events. All we needed to do was to follow the same path. I had the honor of experiencing the rest of the story, with its difficulty, its petty stubbornness, and its enthusiasm. And it remained an uninterrupted lesson given by men and women whose ideas were still intact, who had understood long before I had that history can be changed, and is changed by taking possession of it, starting with the destiny of the children.

Certainly the parents thought foremost about rescuing the children and giving them a secure place and the possibility to learn. They had not planned something grand; they had to find eggs and flour from the farmers to feed the children in the school and wood to keep the stove going in the winter. Malaguzzi learned from this grass roots initiative, understood its value, was inspired by the courage he saw, and decided to support Villa Cella and other schools started by parents. However, it was only in 1963, after he had finished his degree preparation and the municipality hired him as a school psychologist, that he succeeded in getting the city administration to take on those schools.

AJP: Can you imagine that this approach could have arisen anywhere but in Italy and from anything but Italian culture?

Gandini: Certainly we have to consider Malaguzzi's experience with the school started by parents in 1946 based, above all else, on goodwill and a sense of social justice. In the following decade, Italian people had both great hope and a strong sense of dissatisfaction with government policies and development. Many in the country felt that working conditions were unfair and started to make their voices heard by asking the government to commit to changes in social legislation. Various sectors of the population participated—workers, students, and women. All wanted to improve their conditions and see their rights recognized in accordance with the new constitution established after the Second World War. The powerful voices among them included students from a school led by a priest named Don Milani. After being marginalized by the Catholic hierarchy to a poor, remote place, he opened a school to rescue children who had failed in other schools. The school he ran was unconventional, but it was based on the strong belief that all children could learn and wanted to learn. He compiled a book in which they were able to demonstrate their learning, and this

book, from the School of Barbiana, became a manifesto for social justice and for a new way of respecting and schooling children. That initiative was followed by a teacher, Bruno Ciari, hired by the city of Bologna to establish preschools. He also published influential articles and books and provided further inspiration for Malaguzzi. Then in 1973, a great writer of books for children, Gianni Rodari, wrote *The Grammar of Fantasy*—which Jack Zipes translated into English in 1996. This book resulted from work done with teachers in Reggio and showed how children could invent stories and, along the way, acquire literacy and a strong sense of self.

So, yes, the popular protest for better social legislation and the active participation of these determined reformers certainly had a great influence on the work in Reggio Emilia and the development of city schools in other Italian cities.

AJP: Where did the Reggio innovators get their ideas? What inspired and influenced the innovators?

Gandini: In Europe after the Second World War, there were many innovative ideas being floated and experiments going on. In France, for example, there was the work of Celestin Freinet; in Switzerland, there was Jean Piaget; and in Russia, the influence of Lev Vygotsky, who had been interested also in the psychology of play. Malaguzzi was an avid reader of all these thinkers, but the one who probably influenced him most was the American John Dewey, whose work dated from much earlier but was translated for the first time in the 1950s. A decade later, Malaguzzi was very attentive to the work of two other influential Americans, David Hawkins and his wife Frances Hawkins, who were active in developing experiences and reflecting on them in line with progressive education. You can see why the Reggio Emilia approach resonates with educators in the United States even though there is a feeling that progressive education failed. In my view, it was never given time enough to develop on its own, whereas, by an odd turn of fate, it developed in Reggio Emilia.

AJP: For clarification, is there really only one Reggio Emilia school and the rest are Reggio inspirations?

Gandini: The educators in Reggio Emilia prefer to call Reggio schools the ones that are in the city of Reggio Emilia. These are all part of a public system of education for young children from three months to six years of age. The system is run by the city government and organized into thirty-three neighborhood infant-toddler centers and preschools. The leaders encour-

age, and ask, people who are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to start or reform a school following aspects of their philosophy and say that their school is inspired by Reggio. The main reason for this is that the schools in Reggio reflect their context and, particularly, the culture of the families who live in that city. As a result, teachers there do not favor attempts to replicate the Reggio schools in other contexts, but instead they encourage teachers in other places to take ideas and strategies learned from Reggio Emilia and construct their schools in ways that reflect and otherwise suit their own respective contexts. I have many examples of this happening in very interesting and innovative ways in different parts of the United States.

AJP: Can you tell us something about the way curriculum evolves in the Reggio classroom and how the partnership between teacher and child encourage children to explore?

Gandini: Teachers in Reggio Emilia work together and are supported by pedagogical coordinators; they all share and start from the basic principle that children have great potential and desire to explore, construct, and learn. The teachers consider the existing space in the city as learning space and prepare environments and situations in the school that respond to the gifts of children. Teachers observe the children in these possibility-rich environments, and on the basis of shared observations and documentations, they construct new possibilities for the children.

It is amazing what observations and also conversations with children can tell us educators about the complexity and beauty of their theories. Teachers in Reggio Emilia are also well aware of what is important for children to learn in terms of language development and numeracy, for example. Therefore, on the basis of what the children do and say, the teachers can offer them the possibilities to explore further and learn more. For example, in one school, the children realized that there was a small table that they liked very much and used for many projects and constructions, and at a certain moment they asked their teacher for another one like it. The teacher called in a carpenter, but asked him not to measure the old one but to ask the children to take the measurements. This developed into a long project in which the children invented and experimented with various ways to measure the old table. They ignored the tape measure that was in the school, trying instead to use their bodies and various objects, settling for a while on a shoe. They created measuring tapes with random numbers, but then realized they all had different lengths. Finally, they came up with a way of measuring that

the carpenter could use. If the teacher had suggested right away that the children use the tape measure, they would have lost all that they learned in this group research. (See the whole story in *Shoe and Meter: First Approaches to the Discovery, Function, and Use of Measurement*, 1997.)

AJP: The Reggio Emilia approach allows children many choices and much latitude. A lot of their activities are voluntary. Why is that?

Gandini: It is based in the deep trust in the richness of children's desire to learn with pleasure and also the ability children have to acquire initiatives and inventions that come from their shared relationships.

AJP: Can you share other instances in which trusting teachers created or took advantage of situations that sparked children's curiosity?

Gandini: Yes, here's one. Teachers had noticed how the light of the sun, shining through a large window in the late morning, created a pattern on the floor, reflecting the shadows of the leaves of a high bush. They realized the power of such a feature because they had heard a five-year-old girl pointing to this pattern and saying to her friend, "You know, when I see those little leaves on the floor, I know it is almost time to set the tables for lunch in our class." The teachers decided to add the shape of a little bird and tape it on the window just above the height of the bush, thus adding another element to the play of the shadows. The next day, one of the three-year-old children spotted the bird on the floor. He called his friends, and they were celebrating that discovery and playing in that space when one of them noticed that the little bird seemed to have moved a bit. The others did not believe him. The teacher offered them a piece of chalk and they outlined the bird with the chalk and went to lunch. When they returned, the bird had really moved. It had moved out of the shape they had made. They asked for tape and they taped down the reflected shape of the little bird. After a while, it moved again. So they went to get some sticks and constructed a cage around it. It was time for their nap and when they woke up, the cage was there but the bird was gone! (This and other stories about light and shadow appear in *Everything Has a Shadow Except Ants,* 1999.)

AJP: Do Reggio schools approach learning as a kind of play? Should learning be playful?

Gandini: Malaguzzi said very clearly that nothing in the school should happen without joy. I do not think that he would have separated play and learning. Consider the concluding passage of his poem from *The Hundred Languages of Children* (2nd edition, 1998, 3):

They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

Malaguzzi's very first explorations and experiences with children were based on play with a purpose. His views were contrary to ritual play managed and controlled by adults, where children were expected to repeat gestures and words chosen by teachers. In Reggio, when children arrive at school in the morning, they play with their friends using materials or games or toys. There is first of all the joy of finding their friends—friends with whom they will spend a long day together and with whom they have already shared years of companionship in school. Some of them have been together since they were a few months old to three years old, and they will be together to when they turn six. Relationships with many shared experiences of learning and play are at the basis of life for all young people who go through those schools.

AJP: Can you give us an instance of a playful episode where a teacher learned as much as a child?

Gandini: Here is one I have told before. The teachers decided early one morning to create a surprise for the twelve-month-old children by lining the whole infant room with packing paper and placing some large crayons here and there on the covered floor. They were not sure what would happen, but certainly they expected great reactions and decided that they would not interfere or prompt the children about the total change in their environ-

ment. They kept the door closed until the whole group of little children arrived. Then they opened the door, though quietly, to be ready to photograph the children's surprise. The children came in, some crawling on all fours, some walking with tentative steps, two of them holding the hands of the teacher. They moved into the room as if absolutely nothing had changed. Some touched or pushed the crayons a bit as they moved on the paper next to them, but without paying it much attention. The teachers were ready with their cameras, ready to document the children's surprise. The teachers waited and waited. Nothing happened. They were ready to put away the cameras, but at a certain point, Francesco started to play with the end of one of the large pieces of paper, and suddenly he tore it off with energy. The paper, which had originally been tightly rolled up, recoiled back into a long tube. Francesco looked at it and picked up the tube, exploring it with attention and pleasure. Then he looked around and grabbed a crayon that was just close enough and inserted the crayon with care into the tube. He seemed to be surprised that it had disappeared, and he looked toward the end of the tube. No, it was not there. He tried to unroll the paper tube looking for *his* crayon, but in so doing, the incline of the tube increased and the crayon rolled out.

Francesco was happy and repeated his explorations several times with different crayons. The teachers were surprised and delighted by the discoveries of the new game Francesco had invented. In reflecting about the experience, they first noted the skills and thoughtfulness that such a young child like Francesco could have. They also reminded themselves how everything is so new for children so young that the novelty of having a paper covering their entire floor was not something to make them particularly curious or surprised. (See "Francesco and the Paper Tube" in *Innovation in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange* 18, [2011]: 2).

AJP: Is art regarded as a form of play in Reggio classrooms?

Gandini: Yes. Let me explain with another story. I am a great admirer, and have the fortune of also being a friend, of Eric Carle and his wife Bobbie. She was a teacher of young children, and because of this and her own aesthetic sensitivity, she has been part of the inventive work of her husband. Eric absorbs himself for intensive periods of time in the very serious and playful creation of painted papers that he saves in neatly ordered drawers. The papers are divided by color and become precious materials, ready for the making of his wonderful collages. From the paper and collages, he creates

characters for his beautifully constructed and colorful stories that enchant parents and children alike.

One special day in Italy, in connection with the opening of an Eric Carle exhibit in the thirteenth-century Communal Palace of the city of Pistoia, Eric agreed to offer the experience of creating painted papers with a group of teachers in the central atelier of the schools for young children. He took his role as teacher quite naturally, and the young teachers, who knew his books well, all became alert students ready to play the game. Eric showed some samples of his painted paper, solemnly put on a white apron—I wondered if he always had one with him—inspected the paint, and started to give a demonstration of how to place the paper and brushes on the table. But then he went to the shelves that contained all sorts of materials, some of them recycled, and looked for pieces with interesting surfaces. I was the translator and enjoyed my privileged position immensely because I could see how he communicated the serious playfulness of this process. Soon, always describing what he was inventing and trying, he went over the surface of the paper multiple times and layered it with imprints from paint applied using the different materials he had found on the shelf—a small sponge, a piece of corrugated cardboard, a small stick, a branch, or a Lego piece—marking, scratching, mixing, and creating patterns and amazing color combinations. With paper after paper, he covered the table closest to him. "This is what I do," he said. "Usually in the summer, we go to our place in the country, and I love to give myself this time. Now it is your turn." And the thirty teachers, who had been watching intently, were ready to spring into action. They collected paint and brushes and found spaces, some on the tables, some on the floor. The paint, the paper, and the many materials they found were used with the joy of playing with colors, shapes, and surfaces. The room was electric! In a short period of time, the teachers covered the floor and tables of that room and the next with the fantastic papers. I have returned to that atelier several times, and I find that some of those papers are kept as treasures.

AJP: What about reading and literacy? Where do they fit into Reggio classrooms? Can learning to read and write be fun? Can it be play?

Gandini: Literacy risks being seen both as the only pathway to success and at the same time a punitive boogeyman that scares away children's joy. Generally, teachers are as much in agreement about the importance of literacy as we are about the importance of play, but sometimes we think they are mutually

exclusive—that time devoted to one takes away from the other. Literacy and play, indeed all learning and play, can go together. They really must go together; together they can and should be pleasurable and rewarding experiences for children, and for teachers and parents as well, who clearly want the best possible for their children now and for the future.

AJP: To what extent has the Reggio approach spread to other cities in Italy and been allowed to infiltrate or inspire education beyond the preschool years?

Gandini: The innovation movement that I described before has influenced schools in several cities. When Carolyn P. Edwards, George E. Forman, and I were choosing a title for the first edition of *The Hundred Languages of Children*, about the schools of Reggio, the publisher did not want to use a subtitle such as "Experiences in Italy in the Schools of Reggio Emilia," so we chose "The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education." However, in Italy while everyone in the field knows about the high quality of the schools of Reggio Emilia and recognizes the leadership and the philosophical thought of Malaguzzi, the term *the Reggio Emilia approach* is not known.

In fact, several municipalities that had progressive governments developed city schools in a similar way, beginning with Bruno Ciari in Bologna. Ciari died prematurely and Malaguzzi became a natural leader of the progressive movement in early-childhood education. With educators elsewhere and several university researchers, he formed a national organization for the study and the support of early-childhood education and became its leader and animator. A similar movement was also active in the elementary schools, but as the elementary schools are dependent on the national government, the innovative initiatives were not supported with the same intentionality and results.

AJP: How do Reggio Emilia schools compare with those you knew as a student? Was there a place for play in your school?

Gandini: There was no formally established place, but children always find a place for play, even where traditional schools leave play only for the intermissions. Children find friends after school and wherever there are informal gatherings of other children. I went to traditional schools and learned in traditional ways, but I always found with my playmates both time and a great deal of space for play. I lived in a small town, and there were many children around. I also had to learn many boring things and

rituals that were meant to brainwash us about the greatness of the regime of the time.

AJP: How did your own early experiences influence your thoughts about how children should be regarded and treated?

Gandini: I grew up in hard times, but my family always had a very solid respect for us as children and for the joy of inventions and relationships. My mother, who was widowed during the war, always invited our friends to stay and share what there was to eat, and around that table, there was so much merriment and play with games and with words and stories. I think her including our friends so much helped her overcome her loneliness and concerns. It worked well, and I think that influenced me and all my siblings.

AJP: When and how did you first become interested and involved in the Reggio Emilia approach?

Gandini: I was interested in progressive education, and in 1976 I started to collaborate on articles for the magazine that Malaguzzi was launching for teachers. It was called *Zerosei* (*Zero to Six*) and later changed publishers and took the name *Bambini*. Around that time, I started to visit the schools in Reggio Emilia and began to bring back to the United States images of those schools and of others in Italy—for example, the ones of Pistoia—to show to teachers at conferences. I thought the spaces for young children in America at that time were often depressing and marginal.

AJP: Where and how did you learn about or get the training necessary to help others learn about the Reggio Emilia approach?

Gandini: My learning about the Reggio Emilia approach and the approach used in other city schools took place gradually through visits to those schools, encounters with their teachers and pedagogical coordinators, and interviews of them about their philosophy and practice. Also, in many cases, I translated their speeches and presentations when they spoke in the United States. In particular, I was the translator for Malaguzzi in three of his four visits to the States. Another strong professional-development experience was preparing the various editions of *The Hundred Languages of Children*.

AJP: How do you account for the rising popularity of the Reggio Emilia approach in the United States?

Gandini: There is a sense of discouragement on the part of teachers as there

is more and more a demand to use standards and testing to guide what learning experiences to offer to children. But we have become more adept over time at communicating among the large number of teachers who are interested in improving their schools.

AJP: Some claim that today's high-stakes testing and commercialism hinder teachers' efforts to encourage creativity. Can the Reggio approach help teachers overcome these obstacles?

Gandini: In this new period of proposals for innovation in the education of children, there are conflicting messages as well as conflicting desires and hopes on the part of teachers and parents. On the one hand, there are well-intended standards, which have been modified once again and proposed at the level of each state, and which create an ever-increasing fear in teachers that they might be required to apply them as if "one size could fit all." On the other hand, there are committed groups—for example, the Alliance for Childhood—that are insisting upon the needs and rights of children to play and on the connection between well-being and learning that can be achieved through play. And what is the reason for insisting on this seemingly self-evident proposition that none of us would disagree with? That reason is the fear, not unfounded, that more standards to be met mean more formal instruction time, even to the point where schools are reducing or even abolishing recess. Many teachers and parents write to me and to others who know about the Reggio Emilia approach and ask where in their state they can find a school that uses the approach of Reggio Emilia.

AJP: How do Reggio Emilia schools assess children's learning?

Gandini: In Italy there are no specifically formulated standards: there are only guidelines about fields of knowledge and fields of experiences that should be offered to young children. Assessment of children's learning and of teachers' work is done through observation, documentation, and interpretation of the experiences that take place in the schools with the support of pedagogical coordinators.

AJP: What does the term *making learning visible* mean in the Reggio Emilia context?

Gandini: *Making Learning Visible* is the title of a book that reports careful and instructive research conducted jointly by educators in Reggio Emilia and researchers from Project Zero at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. Making learning visible is the process of documentation and assessment that takes place during experiences conducted by teachers and

children together. Documentation truly makes visible how teachers and children construct learning together through strategies that are in harmony with children's interests and teachers' shared intentions.

AJP: Have Americans contributed innovations to the Reggio Emilia approach?

Gandini: I certainly think that educators in the United States who have visited and studied the schools of Reggio have contributed a great deal through their questions and observations to help educators in Reggio reflect on their work, adjust their way of explaining, and go deeper in making their process visible. Furthermore, as educators from Reggio have visited a variety of schools and have participated in conferences and meetings all over the world, their horizons have become larger. They now have many connections with schools from many other countries.

AJP: Before we conclude, we want to learn more about your own research and writing. You have written that bedtime ritual is important to calm children before they go to sleep. What rituals do you recommend, and do they give parents and children permission to let the imagination range freely?

Gandini: In my research on bedtime, I have avoided giving advice. I think personal choices are already so complex and so based on psychological needs of both children and parents (mostly mothers) that there are no formulas that can fit all situations. What I was studying was, first of all, the historical background of traditions (lullabies) and devices (swaddling clothes, cradles) to ease and facilitate the going to sleep of infants and young children.

I was also very interested in the rituals of separation at bedtime and how there are in those rituals both individual family and cultural variations. There is a time of the day in the lives of families with young children, especially in western cultures (I was studying New England and two regions of Italy), when there is a heightened sense of interdependence and a pull between the desire both to enjoy each other's company and to let one's self go to sleep. The schedule of young children at bedtime in Italy is almost two hours later than it is in families in my sample in New England, but the strategies that children find to receive more attention are brilliant and inventive in both cases.

AJP: Other than the time of retiring, do you observe other important differences between children's bedtime rituals in United States and Italy?

Gandini: In the United States, mothers (or fathers) rely much more on book reading as a transition toward sleep, while in Italy the telling of stories, singing of lullabies, or lying beside the young child seems more frequent.

AJP: In your scholarly work, you have also written about *filastrocche* and *cantilene*, the rich traditions of nursery rhymes and singsong that engage so much of children's play in Italy. Why should we adults be listening to children's verses?

Gandini: Because we would discover a great deal about learning and relationship strategies shared with joy between adults and children and about the creative play of inventing words and rhymes by children. We would learn about the power of literacy developing in the interaction of adults with children and of children with children in play.

Besides the lullabies, there are traditional rhymes that for many a century have been vehicles for learning with closeness and pleasure between mother (or grandmother or nanny) and child. Those are the ones that are used by parents to enter in close relationships with young children, creating a physical bond, developing their language skills, and enjoying playful games, accompanied by a sense of rhyme and rhythm.

When children begin to play in groups or start to spend part of their day in a center, a preschool, or, later, a primary school, there is a repertoire of rhymes that is always refreshed and reinvented to tease or to accompany play. There are counting rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, and many others that accompany movement or facilitate selection in group games. These are part of play and often have the function of initiation within a group. They often absorb contemporary events and characters that strike the children's imagination and are transmitted through the secret channels of children's communication. One of my favorite examples invented and used by children is:

Oh Pele who plays more?
How many goals is he going to score?
He will score twenty-three.
One, two, three, *out you go.*

AJP: Did your interest in fairy tales spring from your research into bedtime rituals and nursery rhymes? How does telling fairy tales enrich the relationships between parents and children?

Gandini: The role of fairy tales is in close connection with what I described about nursery rhymes. Of course, traditional tales and fairy tales require a longer time to be told, so that children and storytellers have to sustain the reciprocal and complex attention.

AJP: Does the Reggio approach encourage children to tell their own stories?

Gandini: Teachers in Reggio Emilia—and also in schools in this country that have had experience with the ideas and practices developed in Reggio Emilia and made them their own—are very interested in sustaining and encouraging children to express their thoughts, ideas, and theories.

Often children express their ideas through metaphors that are very beautiful. Here is one about natural phenomena:

> The leaves fall because they are holding on to the tree with just one hand,
> The sea is born from mommy wave,
> The thunder makes the clouds dance.

If children are encouraged to listen to each other, they learn to connect to a friend's idea, and their conversations might become like stories. Children between five and six years old often wish to dictate to the teachers or experiment with writing stories.

AJP: You mentioned earlier that parents and teachers often ask you how to find schools that use the Reggio Emilia approach. What do you tell them? Can parents easily find such schools or help start them?

Gandini: The North American Reggio Alliance has been developing information on its website, organizing professional-development meetings of many kinds, and assigning a representative in each state. There is also the quarterly publication mentioned before called *Innovations in Early Childhood Education: The International Reggio Exchange*. Both the alliance and the periodical have websites with information about programs and study tours.

AJP: We hear often about the detrimental influence of popular culture. Can teachers take positive educational advantage of the images and stories that come from sources in popular media?

Gandini: I will answer that question with another story. It goes like this: Some teachers had heard from concerned parents, and had also observed directly, that some children would bring superhero toys to school. This was especially true for a group of five-year-old boys. When it was time to go out to play, the boys would become superheroes themselves, with different super abilities and imaginary magic tools and powers, and they would make grandiose and bellicose gestures as they played. The parents wanted

the teachers to forbid the children to play these games, but the teachers thought they might turn these games into opportunities. Therefore, they proposed to the boys the possibility of extending their play by inviting the girls as well. A suggestion was made also that the children construct a superheroes play place somewhere in the school. They would make a list of materials they needed, and the teachers would request the collaboration of the parents. The children were very pleased, discussed the idea among themselves (although some seemed more interested during open play in writing messages and whispering in each other's ears), and made lists and plans. Pretending all the while to be different superheroes, they became involved in a very constructive way in cooperation and problem solving. Slowly the space took shape and, through the work of the children and their requests for and findings of recycled materials, the place began to resemble a super space station. To complete their play with communication, the children asked for a computer, and more and more, the tone and characteristics of their competitive super characters became extraterrestrial. With some uncertainty in their writing, they compiled and sent messages into space on the computer: "We are here." "Don't you dare…?" "Where are you?"

AJP: Do creative interludes like this ever spill over into the real world?

Gandini: Yes, they do. The superheroes story brings to mind a well-documented experience by a small group of children, two boys and a girl, who wanted to write a letter to ask questions of "the most important astronaut." They were beginning writers, and as they started the message, they responded with great laughter to their own outrageous mistakes. But they were encouraged by their teachers who then opened up the process and gave time for the rest of the class of four- and five-year-olds to contribute to the letter.

Here it is in part, and I think it sums up what we have been discussing.

Letter to the Most Expert Astronaut

Have you ever helped an extraterrestrial be born?
How do extraterrestrials talk? I'm sure they talk; they aren't stupid, but we don't know their language.
Are aliens and extraterrestrials different kinds of people?
Are we another kind of people?
Could they be made out of green rock? Or shocks? Or gas? Or are they full of oxygen and carbon dioxide?

Can extraterrestrials also be immortal?
Can we invite all those guys from other planets to come to earth?
Do you think they might be bad?
Do they have cities or only gas?
If they meet us and understand us will they feel better?
If we send them some maps maybe they'll be more convinced.

(This letter appears in "A Group Message," from *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners* [2001], 277.)