

Children are Citizens: The Everyday and the Razzle-Dazzle

By Mara Krechevsky, Ben Mardell, Tiziana Filippini, and Maddalena Tedeschi



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“DC belongs to anyone who takes care of it really good. The other people have to practice.”

Maya, 4.7 years, Washington, DC

“You know how you share food with people? That’s what it’s like living in a city—you share the whole city with everybody. It’s like a house that you share with your family.”

Ingrid, 5.1 years, Washington, DC

“Reggio Emilia is big because lots of houses fit in it, and that way we can be friends with other people.”

Francesco, 5.6 years, Reggio Emilia

“People have always built cities because without cities everyone would have to stand up all the time and just walk around.”

Laura, 5.2 years, Reggio Emilia

Children, Their Schools, and Their Cities

(We use the word **city** as an all-encompassing term to refer to towns, suburbs, and other communities where people live together within some form of organized government.)

How do children get to know their city and the city get to know its children? How often are children asked their opinions about their city? The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) established that in addition to children's **human** rights to protection from harm and provision of an adequate standard of living, children also possess **civil** rights to participate in the cultural and civic activities of their communities. We, the authors of this article, maintain that children are indeed citizens from birth with the right to participate in the civic life of their cities. Cities belong to the adults and children who live there—even young children, who are capable of generating compelling insights about their communities.

The recognition of children as citizens is an essential pillar of the Reggio schools. Sustaining the strong bond between children's and adults' destinies has characterized 50 years of dialogue and cultural and political collaboration between the city of Reggio and its municipal preschools and infant-toddler centers. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, believed that schools are a critical context for fostering the relationship between children and the city. Once Malaguzzi said:

Our children go outside of the school as often as they can. They go to discover what is there or not in the city and to reflect and maybe conquer, with the help of the adults, what could be there . . . [They go] to strengthen relationships with cultural and sports institutions, to run in the fields, to meet the farmers . . . [They go] to discover people's most beautiful trades, where and how their fathers and mothers work, to make friends with the elderly in their nursing home—images that are missing from their eyes and minds but that are essential to launch themselves into life, into the future. They invite

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to school the farmer and the factory worker, to hear their stories, their problems, the conditions of the work, and to understand the meaning of life, to feel they are part of a wider community. (see also Cagliari et al., 2016)

How might we help children imagine their futures as active members of their communities? Schools are an ideal setting for fostering a dialogue between children and the city. Like the ancient Greek *agora*, classrooms can serve as laboratories for life in a democratic community—places where knowledge and culture are both created and transmitted. When children encounter other perspectives—when they discuss, argue, and compare ideas—they are building understanding and making public that which had been private. Cities also provide a construct that three-, four-, and five-year-olds can understand—places they can experience and to which they can respond.

This article is written for those who wish to foster a relationship between children and their cities. We start with two examples of children's contributions to their communities, one from Reggio Emilia—a city with a long and rich history of connecting children to their community, and one from Washington, DC—a city that has more recently built child-community connections. We close by identifying three lessons learned about engaging children in their communities.

La Bambina del Profumo (The Perfume Girl): A Gift for the City

Throughout the history of Reggio Emilia's municipal infant-toddler centers and pre-schools, the city has often been the subject of, and participant in, project ideas suggested by children and adults. Each day, schools and centers seek to build meaningful relations with the local area (*territorio*), city, and people. The surrounding environment is a concrete resource that can be interwoven with curriculum design.

“For a Scaffolding” was one of these journeys—a six-month project by five- and six-year-old children about a historic place of particular significance for the people of Reggio—the old covered market in the city's central street, Via Emilia. The idea—promoted by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia and Reggio Emilia's municipal *Istituzione* for Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools, Reggio Children, and the *Accademia di Belle Arti* [Arts Academy] in Brera, Milan—was a proposal made with the input of children and artists to design large works to “inhabit” the scaffolding that covered the market building during its renovation.

The Department of Culture in the city suggested that the scaffolding project be developed around the feeling or expression of **desire** (the Italian word *desiderare* means to wish or desire). In this article, rather than narrate the entire project, we focus on those steps of the

project that make visible how children conceive of their role in the supportive context of the school.

From the beginning, the educators worked with the children to contextualize such a topic in a public place. The city spaces were not only inhabited by the children, they were also thought up, designed, and re-signified by them with intelligence and sensibility. Children, therefore, became city protagonists and city planners.

Initial conversations in school were generated by seemingly simple questions by teachers:

“What is desire?”

“What does it mean to desire (or wish for) something?”

“In your opinion, can everyone and everything feel a desire for things?”

The children gave “broad” answers, open and rich in empathy for other beings, living and non-living:

“Desires are everywhere.” Lorenzo, 5.8 years

“Everything can have a wish, because if nothing wishes for anything, there would be nothing. Animals can wish, ants, a heart, fingers, hands, everyone.” Margherita, 6.6 years

“Even a line can wish. It can wish to be drawn one day, to be given life.” Arianna, 6.10 years

“My wish is to smell the perfume of flowers with my nose. You can buy flowers, but you can't buy their perfume.” Lu Yi Sha, 7 years

These fragments of conversations speak of desire as a free and universal sentiment rightfully belonging to one and all. Desire is a feeling that drives knowledge and taking part in the world. As the philosopher and cultural anthropologist Umberto Galimberti reminds us, “Desire is the great revolutionary machinery of life.”

Teachers, with the children, identified ideas to set thoughts in motion and create passion around a theme. Ideas easily multiplied into more ideas made of words and subjective mental images. The teachers felt it was important that the children identify possible ways of giving shape to these ideas—to translate them into **figurative ideas**. The same idea can take different forms, so it was important for children to share mental images and give form

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Children encountering the scaffolding with the work of the artists

to them, even just an outline, so that they became public and inter-relatable. For each idea the children proposed, the teachers and children collected objects, materials, and images, bringing to life small visualizations. Together they made “tables of ideas,” first to remind themselves of things to look for, and then as a real collection of small but visible “cells” of the ideas.

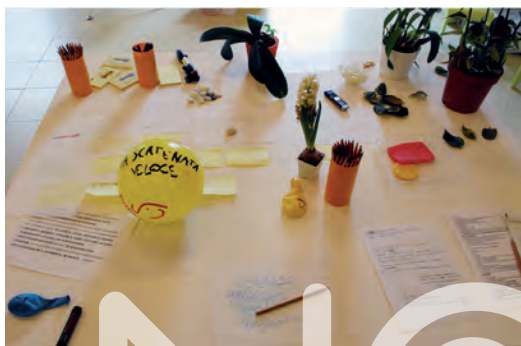


Table of ideas

The tables were physical and mental places where ideas could take time to settle in relation to each other, each legitimized in its existence. They were places that helped to make the group process visible to children. It may seem distracting to stretch time out, but it allowed us to build more intense relationships with and between ideas and then to make choices together or find a new idea. The tables were contexts that sought to give value to subjectivity through dialogue and construction of thought with others.

The adults’ intention in the scaffolding project was to seek coherence between the realization of an exhibited work and the participatory dynamic of shaping it. Children partook in their own ideas, discussing and adjusting them in a democratic practice that considered content along with the procedures that being part of a group implies.

The children’s ideas about desires and wishes began to dialogue with the project’s intended destination in ways that revealed their empathy and capacity for listening. In fact, the children were absolutely convinced that the scaffolding also had desires and wondered:

“How can we understand his wishes seeing as he can’t speak?” (The Italian word for scaffolding has a male article.)

At this point, the children and teachers met to decide how to proceed. The idea of perfume in the words of Lu Yi Sha, “My nose desires the perfume of flowers,” was one that emerged over time. It was both an intuition and an increasingly consolidated and shared direction.

For the children, perfume was a concentrate of certain fundamental characteristics. It could be the wish of a person, of many people, of a place, or of a city. Perfume and desire share similar identities in that both generate well-being. It was a lovely idea that could gather together the many meanings the children were seeking.

“Everyone can smell it, and all its friends will feel good.” Elena, 5,7 years

“The wall wants to be perfumed.” Artur, 6 years

The design of the project the children inhabited daily always tried to maintain a visible, active relationship with the destination of their work. Photographs of the scaffolding were always available, which enabled the children to make multiple and rapid simulations.

Research often develops in multiple directions simultaneously. At the same time that children’s projects were focused on an overall vision of the environment that their work would transform, the children and teachers also felt the need to explore specific elements such as perfume. The teachers asked,

“What is perfume?”

“How many perfumes can we distinguish?”

“What are they made of? How are they made?”

“How can we tell their story?”

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Alliance



profumo di rosa
Lu yu sha

The perfume of a rose

Sensitive thoughts and interpretations in mark-making and drawing—capable of conveying the qualities of perfume—emerged from the children.

“Perfume is subtle.” Artur, 6 years

“It moves with the wind.” Desiree, 6 years

“Perfume draws its shape in the air.” Sara, 6.1 years

“It talks with all the other perfumes, so the world becomes all perfumed. It makes the city feel good, and so there is perfume for everyone.” Elena, 5.7 years

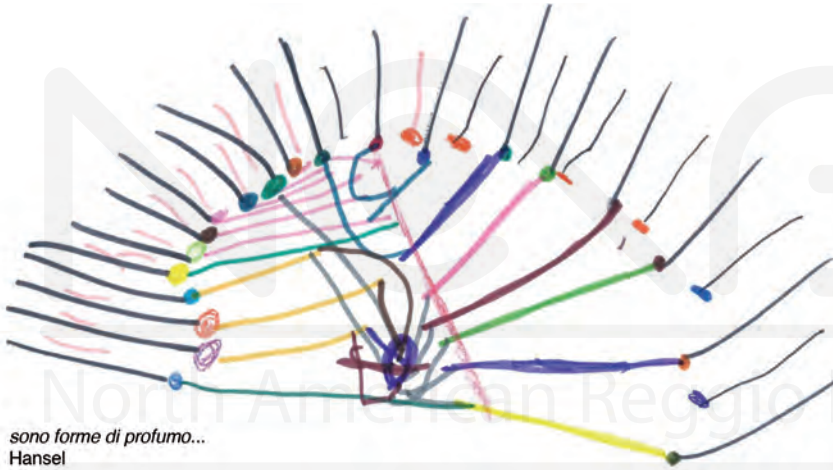
In speaking of the well-being generated by smell, the children were focusing on a relationship between perfume and the body. In their theories—in words and drawings—the body was understood as an intelligent element, a place of experience, and a context in which they rendered desire and perfume perceptible.

The children recognized similarities in the behaviors of desire and perfume:

“When a perfume is inside us, we don’t feel the same as before because a perfume makes us dream.”

Artur, 6 years

“Hands can smell, too. The perfume comes in through the nail, and then goes inside.” Margherita, 6.6 years



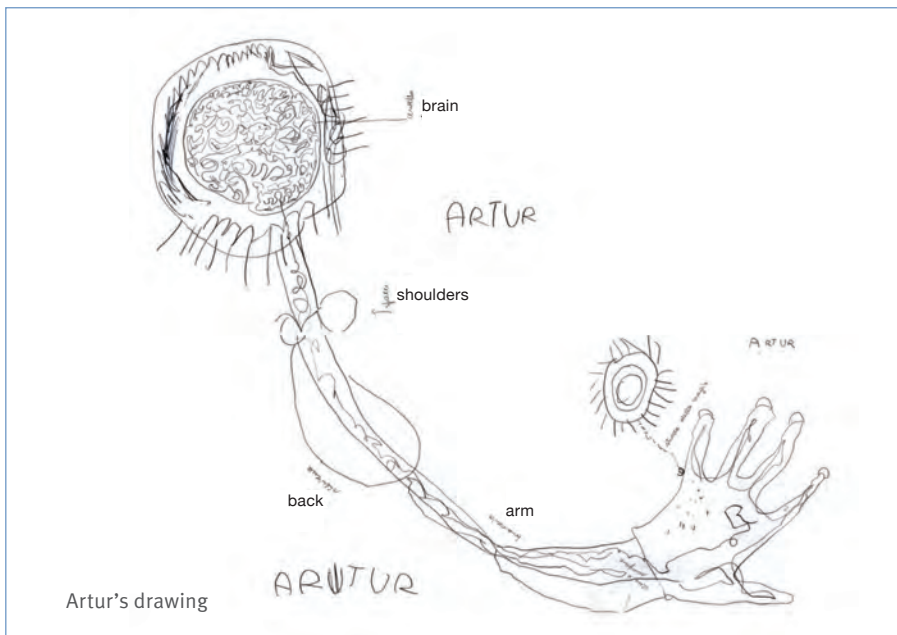
sono forme di profumo...
Hansel

They are the shapes of a perfume . . .

Two boys, Hansel and Michael, and two girls, Arianna and Margherita, began to give shape to the encounter between perfume and body. Their drawings included subjective hypotheses which, when discussed and reinterpreted, led to a visual theory. In the large drawing, the children interpreted the relationship between perfume and body as a cycle of life that generates reciprocal transformations.

In explaining the drawing, the children said:

Thanks to the hand’s contact with the flowers, the perfume gets into the body through the fingernails. It is very powerful. It descends and enters the body. It goes into the brain, where it is still powerful. It spreads through the body and gradually gets lighter. When it leaves the body, it is very, very thin. It meets with flowers again and recharges, then part of it spreads into the air and the space around it, and part goes back inside the body through the hands.



Artur’s drawing

With this drawing as a starting point, the teachers proposed to all the children that they each create their own personal interpretation. This became the basis for work on a new large drawing.



The children at work

“We have to do the journey of the perfume.”
Margherita, 6.6 years

“The perfume goes inside the arm. It spreads out and goes into the whole body . . . It’s all strong perfume. The hand is where there is most perfume.”
Kevin, 6.4 years

The *atelier* became a space where this scaffolding could be simulated, and children tried out possible installations on different scales. Children made evaluations together in order to choose between multiple possibilities. Projections onto a wall became a worktable for the group for trying out various combinations of the different elements of the project, simulating a view from underneath the scaffolding, and trying to understand perspectives and proportions.

The children’s final work was printed on a larger scale on canvas and mounted on the scaffolding of the covered market, where it



The emerging theory

remained for several months until the renovation work was completed. The inauguration took place during a large street party in the heart of the city that was open to children and adults and accompanied by a perfume *atelier* created by the school in a flower shop nearby.



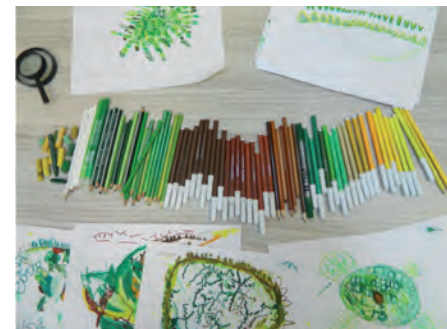
The perfume *atelier*

“We have given the wall a new desire.”
Elena, 5.7 years

“If everyone keeps a wish, it gets bigger and bigger, because so many people hold it tight.”
Lorenzo, 5.8 years



The inauguration of the Perfume Girl



“The Story of Rayo”

The Reggio schools have a more than 50-year history of connecting children to the city. What if a city does not have this tradition? How does a city establish a tradition in which young children are considered not just future, but current citizens with their own distinctive contributions to make?

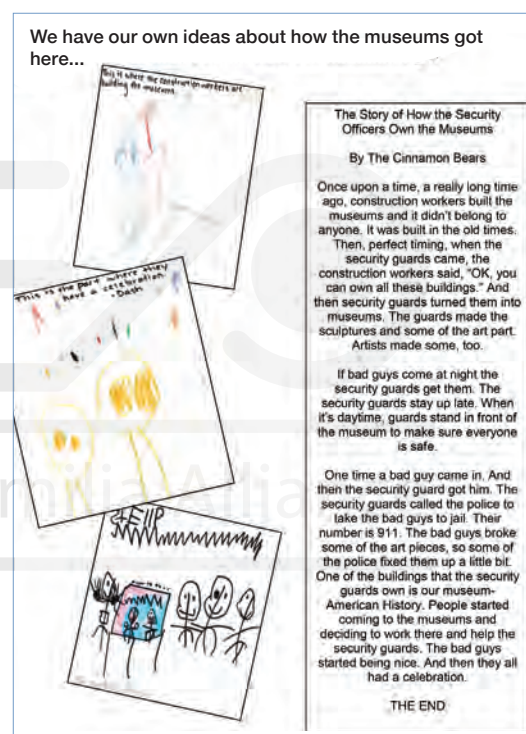
In 2014, Jim Reese of the Washington International School and Nathalie Ryan at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC came together with Ben Mardell and Mara Krechevsky to develop an initiative called “Children **Are** Citizens: Children and Teachers Collaborating across Washington, DC” (CAC). Their goal was to build informed, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships between children and the city. During the 2014–2015 school year, 331 children and 23 educators from five schools throughout the city—Sacred Heart School, Seaton Elementary School, School within School @ Goding, the Smithsonian Early Education Center, and the Washington International School—explored the idea of young children as citizens in the here and now, with the capacity to contribute to their community in powerful ways. Seventeen classrooms from PreK3 through 1st grade spent the fall and winter discovering and researching places in the city that interested them.

Across the city, children played, talked, wrote, drew, photographed, and created three-dimensional models. Children shared their work with each other, soliciting feedback from classmates in their own schools as well as from schools in other parts of the city. Their research was supported by field trips to the National Gallery of Art and Imagination Stage (a children’s theater company and another cultural partner) and school visits by arts educators. Teachers and arts educators participated in monthly professional development seminars, which emphasized documenting children’s learning and supporting learning in groups to foster children’s inquiry into the city. The tool of documentation—the practice of observing, recording, interpreting, and sharing the processes and products of learning in order to assess and deepen learning (Krechevsky, Mardell, Rivard, & Wilson, 2013)—helped teachers stay close to children’s thinking and learning by enabling them to revisit children’s work and words. This process was critical to informing the next steps.

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One result of this effort was the book *Washington, DC, Belongs to Everyone!*, co-authored by DC’s youngest citizens. The book shares children’s perspectives and emerging theories about the city in text and images; it includes 10 chapters that describe the results of children’s explorations of different aspects of the city such as the Metro, monuments, museums, public sculptures, and playgrounds. For example, one classroom of four-year-olds from the Smithsonian Early Education Center investigated museums and shared a collectively imagined story of how the security guards came to own the museums.



The Cinnamon Bears’ (4-year-olds) view of who owns museums

Another class of three-year-olds from the Sacred Heart School, a Catholic dual language school in Northwest DC serving a significant number of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch, chose to investigate the Metro under the guidance of their teacher, Anna Ramirez. Anna was a new teacher at the Sacred Heart School. She taught a Spanish immersion class of 13 three-year-olds, 11 boys and two girls. The children decided it was the Metro that made Washington, DC special. To provoke the children’s thinking, Anna facilitated a “thinking routine” called “See-Think-Wonder” in which she showed the children captivating images of the Metro and asked them to describe what they saw, what it made them

think, and what it made them wonder. Emily, a teaching artist from Imagination Stage, also visited Anna's class and led children through a reenactment of a Metro ride.



Facilitating the "See-Think-Wonder" routine

The children suggested to Anna that the class take a ride on the Metro. Armed with clipboards for sketching and iPads to take pictures of what they deemed important for other children to know about the transit system, the children began their field research. When the Metro station manager saw the group of children with clipboards and iPads, he was skeptical until he asked the young researchers what they were doing. "Investigating the Metro" was their reply. The children were especial-

ly impressed by the speed of the train, by the Metro traveling above as well as below ground, and by how many train lines met at the Metro Center stop.



Anna showing children map of the Metro



At first, Anna struggled to use documentation. When she collected documentation, she was not sure what to do with it. But, over time, she came to see the value in revisiting the documentation to plan the next steps and sharing the documentation with the children so that they could build on what they had learned. Anna printed selected photographs from the images taken on the iPads for the children to review. They then drew pictures based on the photos and created their own Metro maps. They also developed theories about where the trains slept after working so hard all day ("in the tunnels where it was dark").



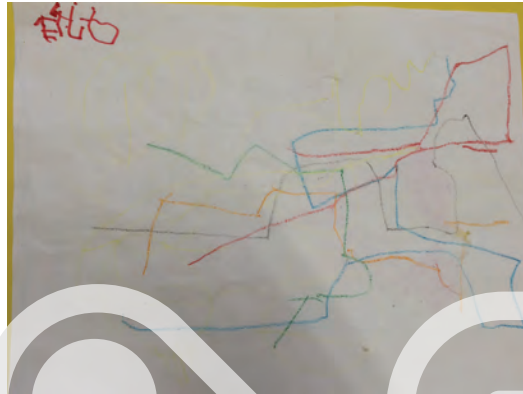
Children on the Metro



Children looking at photos from their iPads

Teachers in the “Children Are Citizens” seminars photographed and shared children’s work from their own classrooms with other teachers so that children could exchange feedback across schools. Because Rebecca Courouble’s PreK4 French immersion class from the Washington International School was also studying the Metro, Anna’s class shared their early drafts of the Metro map with Rebecca’s class. Anna requested photographs of the children looking at the maps, because she wanted the children “to be able to see and feel what it’s like to have someone you don’t know, look [at] something you created.”

The feedback from the children in Rebecca’s class was specific and direct. Their comments helped the children from Anna’s class to create better maps and to realize that they could change their ideas if other suggestions appealed to them more.



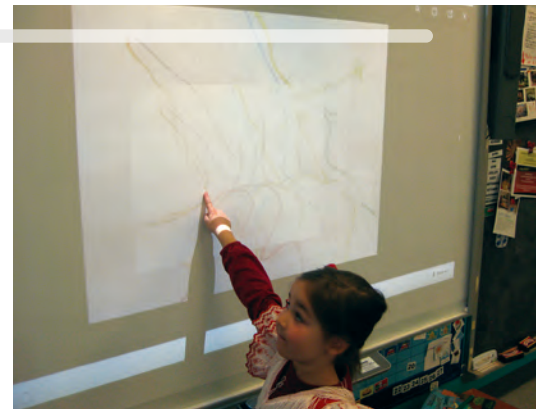
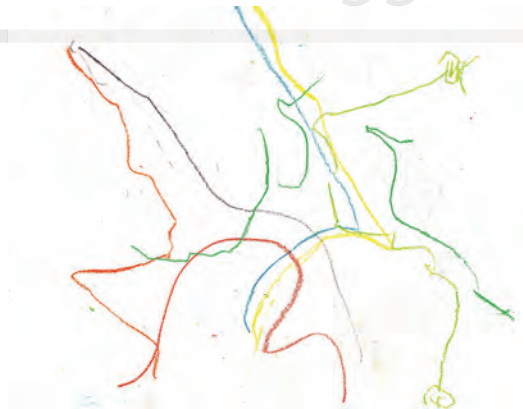
Sharing feedback on Elija’s map

“The red line should start from the top, then turn, then go back up.” Helen

“Try to do a better blue line. We do not see it well.” Sammy

“Maybe practice the scientific eyes when he looks at the Metro map.” Imogen

“Try on a bigger paper.” Derek



Sharing feedback on Joshua’s map

“He did a good job because he put the yellow and the blue together.” Helen

“The green line should not be broken. It is supposed to be connected.” Linnea

“The orange line should also be next to the blue line.” Sonia

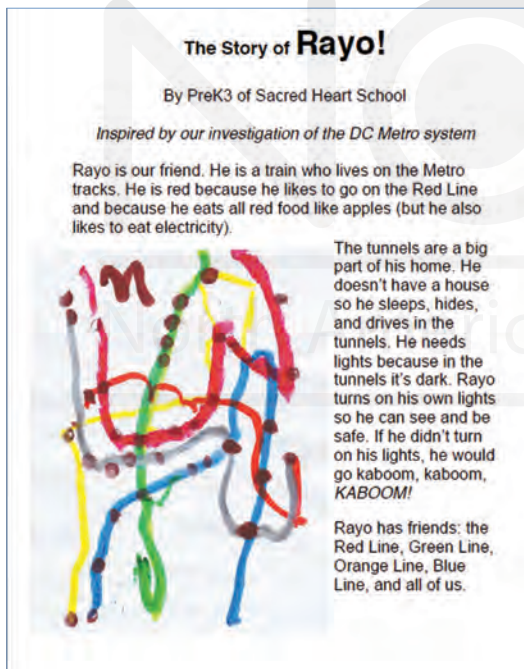
When children grow up in a culture and begin their schooling with support for thinking, feeling, and acting in groups, they are more likely to participate in and practice democracy as informed and caring citizens.

—Mara Krechevsky and Ben Mardell

The children’s response shows that they both welcomed other points of view (“He did a good job, because he put the yellow and the blue together”) and retained their own points of view (“The green line should not be broken”). Children identified problems and made suggestions. Ultimately, with support from Anna and Kristen Kullberg, the Integrated Arts Specialist, the PreK3 children at Sacred Heart shared what they learned by writing a story about a special Metro train named *Rayo* (“Because *Rayo* means **lightning** in Spanish . . . and because he is so fast!”).

their schooling with support for thinking, feeling, and acting in groups, they are more likely to participate in and practice democracy as informed and caring citizens.

At the celebration of the book launch at the National Gallery of Art, every child received his or her own copy of the book, along with a red author’s sticker. The joy, wonder, and excitement of the adults along with the children were palpable. Each school donated a book to the local public library. One year later, the books have been checked out of the libraries numerous times, and the authors of “The Story of *Rayo*,” now four, are described by their teacher as children who hold themselves accountable for listening to each other and giving each other relevant and respectful feedback.



The first page of “The Story of *Rayo*!”

Throughout the CAC project, children shared knowledge and ideas and reasoned logically to solve problems. They drew on their mathematical skills to make aesthetic decisions about their book pages (e.g., planning how to include their most important ideas in the eight pages allotted each class) and developed literacy skills (e.g., using new vocabulary to explain their ideas, conveying their ideas in words and images, and learning how books were made). When children grow up in a culture and begin



Authors at the celebration at the National Gallery of Art

Lessons Learned

We hope the examples from Reggio and Washington, DC will inspire readers to undertake projects to engage children in the civic life of their cities. Elsewhere we have shared examples of other projects in the U.S. (Mardell & Carpenter, 2012; Mardell, 2011). We have also shared a preliminary framework for creating such projects (Krechevsky, Mardell, & Romans, 2014). Here, we share three lessons learned.

Choosing topics that connect children and their communities

How can one identify a topic or a project that connects children with their communities? In *La Bambina del Profumo*, educators were alert to opportunities such as the canvas construction scaffolding in the heart of the city. Opportunities like this abound. In Providence, RI, educators realized that the National Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Institute, with the participation of 2,000 early childhood educators from around the country, presented just such an opportunity. They invited children to create a guidebook called *Places to Play in Providence*. The construction of a local playground, or other shared space in a community, is also ripe for children's input (Hall, 2011).

Choosing a topic can also be an outgrowth of a need in the community. In Washington, DC, educators wanted to elevate the visibility of young children and the value of high quality early childhood education. A beautiful book that shares children's thoughts, stories, and theories about DC was the result. Other needs may be more complex and challenging to address, though they still deserve consideration. In 2002, when Reggio educators noticed that children were talking about the war in Iraq, they decided to select some of the children's comments to put on banners in front of the municipal theater. The children's points of view became part of the debate going on at the time. We believe children's thoughts about police and safety in their cities would contribute to the conversation around issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. In all these cases, the topics identified by adults were broad and flexible enough to allow children's interests to play a central role in shaping the project.

Making learning and learners visible: The value of the razzle-dazzle

Holding public events like the celebration at the National Gallery of Art or the inauguration of *La Bambina del Profumo* in the center of Reggio take a great deal of work. So, why do them? As Malaguzzi suggested, children should go outside the school as often as they can to discover "images that are missing from their eyes and minds, but are essential to launch themselves into life, into the future." We want to make children's hearts and minds visible to themselves, to their teachers and families, and to the communities and policymakers whose guidelines and programs influence their lives.

Venturing beyond the classroom and creating a shareable product accomplish two things. First, they challenge adults' assumptions and beliefs about young children's capabilities. They encourage adults to look at children differently and perhaps to take them more seriously. Second, making children's thinking and feelings visible refreshes and renews the ways adults look at the world; it reminds adults of the joy of life and fosters empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. The adults who encounter "The Story of Rayo" probably did not think of the Red Line and Green Line as their friends, just as the adults who walk through the historic city center in Reggio probably never thought about listening to the walls. Of course, walls don't speak, but perhaps one can imagine what they might say if they could. Perhaps adults who ride the Metro will think of the story of *Rayo* and smile. As developmental psychologist Allison Gopnik (2009, p. 246) writes, "Very young children can use their causal maps of the world—their theories—to imagine different ways that the world might be. . . . Eventually, they enable even adults to imagine alternative ways the world could be and make those alternatives real."

Remembering the everyday

The deep and thoughtful collaboration in *La Bambina del Profumo* and "The Story of Rayo" emerge from the everyday life of the classrooms, where teachers recognize the value of listening to children and helping children to construct their own culture. Children do not just share what they **already** know—they build knowledge together. In these classrooms,

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children learn how to listen to each other; they acquire the skills and dispositions to work together to solve problems and develop ideas; and they are comfortable asking questions and finding their own answers. These practices are foundational to meaningful connections between children and their communities. Democratic classrooms encourage children to have a voice in matters of consequence and to engage in a process in which they consider one another's perspective in order to reach solutions.

In this context, democracy is not about individuals stating their views as loudly as they can in order to win an argument; nor is it about self-advocacy, persuasion, or majority rule. Rather, it is about creating a community that works for each individual as well as for the group—individuals coming together to listen, to learn, and to convey and create knowledge and culture. Again, think of the *agora*, where children learn to share their own perspectives and encounter new ones, and to offer and receive feedback on their points of view.

Nurturing such cultures involves much more than allowing children to vote about matters such as whether to have pretzels or crackers

for snack (in reality, there is no reason you can't have both); rather, it involves attention to every aspect of the day—from the way children are welcomed in the morning, to the formation of classroom rules, to negotiating plans for the day in morning meeting, to engaging in long-term projects. Every moment of every day is grounded in a democratic vision.

We give the eminent psychologist and honorary citizen of Reggio Emilia, Jerome Bruner, the last word. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Reggio municipal preschools, Bruner said:

Every child is given an opportunity to grow into effective adults. That, to me, is the ultimate granting of rights to children: not putting up a sort of battle saying we are in favor of the rights of the children, but doing something so that they can use their rights as well. (Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'infanzia, Reggio Children, & International Association Friends of Reggio Children, 2006)

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Resources

Project Zero website:
www.pz.harvard.edu

Reggio Children Resources/Learning Materials Workshop website:
<http://learningmaterialswork.com/reggio-children-resources>

Reggio Children website:
www.reggiochildren.it

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