

# Innovations

In-Early Education:  
The International  
Reggio Emilia Exchange



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Innovations was created in  
1992 through an agreement  
between Loris Malaguzzi,  
founder of the Reggio Emilia  
approach, and El Saifi, then  
director of the Merrill-Palmer  
Institute, Wayne State  
University, which published  
Innovations from 1992-2008.  
This periodical continues to be  
developed in solidarity with the  
Preschools and Infant-Toddler  
Centers, institutions of the  
Municipality of Reggio Emilia,  
Reggio Children, and the Reggio  
Children - Loris Malaguzzi  
Center Foundation.

## Introduction

*The December 2019 issue of Innovations is the last issue of the year and also of the decade! By nature, endings offer opportunities to reflect on past experiences while also considering the future. This issue of Innovations focuses on communities that see reflection interconnected with learning and the possibility of transformation. As Loris Malaguzzi (1993) stated, "Our aim is to make a school that is a place of research, learning, revisiting, reconsideration, and reflection" (p. 9).*

*When done with others in a learning community, reflection creates opportunities to develop deeper understandings of experiences. Reflection is an important way to end the year and decade as we consider how to relaunch into the future that lies ahead.*

Reflection is an important way  
to end the year and decade as  
we consider how to **relaunch**  
into the future that lies ahead.

*We start with an article titled, "Below the street, in the soil: A journey of becoming in Johannesburg, South Africa," from authors Judith Browne and Heather Barclay of the Mimosa School in Johannesburg, South Africa. The authors describe a community project in which a section of road is closed to cars and transforms into a space where people can move freely. The authors state, "We were inspired by this idea of reclaiming our streets as public spaces and turning them*

*into a piazza." Collaborative reflecting on documentation was essential for embracing uncertainty and seeing their community in new ways. The authors state:*

*Stepping into the unknown of the street forced us to pay closer attention to what and how the children were experiencing and exploring, and to engage more deeply with how our documentation of these explorations could be used to project forward.*

*Through reflection, they came to the realization that, "Where we adults might have only seen barriers, the children found possibilities."*

*In this issue of Innovations, we reflect on the life and work of Canadian educator Susan Fraser. Carol Anne Wien and Patricia Tarr reflect on the many lives Fraser touched and also the great impact she continues to have on the field of early childhood education. NAREA was honored to present Sue with our Lifetime Achievement Award in October of 2014.*

*The "Voices: Conversations from North America and Beyond" column includes reflections from 14 educators from six states who were participants in the Five State Study Group's recent study week in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The authors share their reflections on the meaning of the word *rilaancio* or *relaunch* as experienced during the study week and within their own contexts. Arizona authors Terry Acevedo, Sabrina Ball, Christie Colunga, and Mimi Gray state:*

*In the context of the study week, relaunch set a tone that grounded the philosophy, not of a state of mind being fixed in certainty, but rather, in an attitude toward openness and creative liveliness to think and generate change into action within a collaborative setting. Relaunch is the right to imagine a different way..."*

*The issue continues with a book review of Reggio Children's newest publication, Bordercrossings: Encounters with Living Things/Digital Landscapes, by Brenda Fyfe, dean and professor emeritus at the School of Education at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. Fyfe says of the book, "It articulates and beautifully illustrates a philosophy of education and research that recognizes and embraces bordercrossings of digital and nature."*

*The "Perspectives on NAREA" column includes information on the opportunity to host the newest exhibition, "Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material," from Reggio Emilia, Italy.*

**Reminder:  
An Invitation to Participate in Research**

*In the September 2019 peer-reviewed issue of Innovations, readers were invited to participate in a teacher research project in collaboration with Reggio Inspired Vermont Early education Team (RIVET) 2.0. The group is requesting others join them in their study of "children and trees in relationship." We would like to re-invite and remind readers to submit your documentation and research to Jeanne Goldhaber at*

*[jeanne.goldhaber@uvm.edu](mailto:jeanne.goldhaber@uvm.edu) by January 15, 2020, to be considered for publication in the Spring 2020 issue of Innovations. If you are sending an image that includes children, you must include a completed and signed permission form for each image. To request a blank photography permission form, email Thresa Grove at [thresa@reggioalliance.org](mailto:thresa@reggioalliance.org).*

**Correction to the June 2019 Innovations Issue**

*In the June 2019 issue of Innovations, we shared an article from the Reggio Children - Loris Malaguzzi Foundation titled, "Constructing a Different Future." This article announced the University of Colorado Boulder as a promoting founder of the Foundation. We would like to announce a correction to this statement as: Boulder Journey School and the University of Colorado Denver are participating founders of the Foundation.*

**Looking Towards the Future**

*For NAREA and Innovations, 2020 will be particularly important as we recognize the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Loris Malaguzzi's birth. We look forward to sharing our reflections on the work of Malaguzzi in the new year.*

**REFERENCE**

Malaguzzi, L. (1993). For an education based on relationships. *Young Children*, 49(1), 9-12.

**NAREA  
Mission Statement**

The North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) is a network of educators, parents, and advocates seeking to elevate both the quality of life and the quality of schools and centers for young children.

We envision a world where all children and adults are honored and respected for their potential, capabilities, and humanity.

Our mission is to build a diverse community of advocates and educators to promote and defend the rights of children, families, and teachers of all cultures through a collaboration of colleagues inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

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**Image Credit**

Cover image courtesy of Mimosa School in Auckland Park, Johannesburg.

# Below the Street, In the Soil: A Journey of Becoming in Johannesburg, South Africa

by Heather Barclay and Judith Browne



Heather Barclay is the principal and Grade 0 teacher at Mimosa School in Auckland Park, Johannesburg. In 2011 whilst training a group of teachers to implement a birth to four curriculum, she was one of the facilitators and participants who were invited to attend the first African conference on the Reggio Emilia Approach, hosted by what was to become the Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance. Stepping out, they all agreed that this was what they had been waiting for – a radical challenge to their

image of child and of early learning. And so began the transformation of the pedagogy and practice at Mimosa School, a learning community seeking to ground itself in who and what it is in trying to truly live out the spirit of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Judith Browne is the atelierista at Mimosa School in Auckland Park, Johannesburg. Her deep feeling for the Reggio Emilia Approach is what drew her into early childhood two years ago (in 2017), but her relationship with it goes further back, to 2008, when her mother first introduced her to the approach. For her, it's more than a philosophy of education; it's a philosophy of life. Her inspiration extends into her work as a writer: Judith wrote the text for the Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance's booklet, *Reimagine Education: Reggio Emilia inspiration in Africa*, published in October 2018, which is paired with the alliance's professional development series for Reggio Emilia inspired educators.

I think that it's a mistake to take any school approach anywhere and assume, like a flower, you can take it from one soil and put it into another one. That never works. That doesn't mean at all that [we] can't learn a tremendous amount from it, but we have to reinvent it... We have to figure out what are the aspects that are most important to us and what kind of soil we need here to make those aspects thrive.

– Howard Gardner in a *CNN Impact* interview, aired in 1995

What type of “soil” do Reggio Emilia inspired schools and teachers thrive in? What conditions ensure that their approach takes root? Are there contexts in which the approach

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thrives, and others where it might wither and die? These are questions that we have been living and working with since our first encounters with Reggio Emilia – questions we hold both as individuals and as a school. And the more we've lived them, the more we've realized the paradox: that to truly live out the spirit of the Reggio Emilia Approach, we have to ground ourselves in who and what we are. In our own *genius loci*, the spirit of the place we call home.

## And So, Who Are We? Where Are We?

This is a story about our coming-to-know. An account of getting curious about the soil under our feet and the sky above our heads. Of coming into a relationship with that which is above, below, and around us in a new and different way. Of learning to encounter with more openness and honesty the people who gather in our learning community every day – our children, our parents, but also ourselves. We hope that in its specificity, readers might find a resonance, a reflection, a counterpoint to their own experience.

## A School in and of the City

Mimosa is a school that is both in and of the city. We are not a forest school, or a farm school, or a school in a gated community. And the city we call home – Johannesburg, South Africa – is a place of paradoxes. In a country with one of the world’s highest *Gini coefficients* (a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income or wealth distribution of a nation’s residents), the city embodies so much of the country’s inequality – in the spatial logic of the city, in people’s access to opportunities, and in their quality of life.

Our school sits on the edge of the city’s Central Business District, wedged between two of South Africa’s top universities and the headquarters of the state broadcasting corporation. On one side of us is a more middle-class, arty suburb, and on the other side a suburb with more of an urban working-class character. Our school in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, sits somewhere in between these markers, as a suburb in transition.

Auckland Park, like many Johannesburg suburbs, is characterized by high walls and electric fences, places where people don’t know their own neighbors. Even though pedestrian routes and cycle lanes have been allocated and demarcated, our streets still tend to be dominated by private vehicles and are not considered to be safe for children to play in. Street furniture, such as benches, are rare, and although a number of families live near the school the vast majority of children travel to school by private vehicle (Parker, 2018).

During her visit to Johannesburg in August/September 2017, Tiziana Filippini challenged local Reggio Emilia inspired educators about the implications of our history and spatial topography for children. She said, “While traveling around the city, I was struck by the lack of children. In Reggio, we believe that if a city is friendly for children, it’s friendly for everyone. Where are your children?”

Her words stuck with us. What were our children’s experiences of the city? And what were we doing to make the city more welcoming

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and friendly for them, to advocate for their rights as citizens?

Institutional change is a slow process, and while we wanted to advocate for more child-friendly urban architecture and policies across our city, we also wondered whether there was something we could do, right now, to enact change on our doorstep.

Toward the end of 2018, we shared Reggio Children’s “Piazza\_Piazze” video with our families as an example of how some of Italy’s youngest citizens are connecting with each other in their city spaces. One of our fathers, Iginio Gagliardone, had this to say, “Maybe the Italian idea of a *piazza* can’t exist physically [right now, in our neighborhood], but maybe it exists between us, in the web of relationships.”

Challenged by this, and also equally wondering over what we could do to grow and expand the web of relationships between children, families, our school, and our wider community (without the shared public spaces that might promote this naturally), we were reminded of the idea and practice of “Open Streets.”

### What is “Open Streets?”

During an “Open Streets” event, a section of road or neighborhood thoroughfare is closed to cars for a period of time and is opened up to people so that they can play, ride bikes, skateboards or other things with wheels, participate in art activities, or just indulge in general neighborhood chatter and sharing of ideas. A car-dominated street is reimagined (if only temporarily) as a public space. (Note for readers: North America is no stranger to this idea. The most rapid spread of “Open Streets” since it first emerged out of Latin America with *Ciclovia* has been in Canada and the USA (Browne et al., 2019).)



Somehow, even without firm answers, the questions in our heads and hearts were just too compelling to leave alone. We had to try to answer them. Before we knew it, Mimosa's learning community was co-organizing an "Open Streets" event in our neighborhood for early 2019 in collaboration with local government departments, non-governmental advocacy and activist organizations, and civic-minded and environmentally conscious individuals.

### Exploding What Research Looks Like

As we began the planning process, we knew we didn't want this to be a one-off event; we wanted the philosophy underpinning "Open Streets" to be a part of our everyday enquiries as a school. As teachers, we met to discuss this and agreed on a year-long inquiry across the whole school (encompassing children aged 18 months up to nine years old): How can we (as Mimosa) connect to our surrounding community via our city streets?

As children and teachers, we began co-researching connections, the community, and our city streets together. What did this process look like? It depended on the age group.

Our youngest children started with the idea of making connections through different materials and environments. They began by

We were inspired by this idea of reclaiming our streets as public spaces and turning them into a *piazza* for a period of time.

We were inspired by this idea of reclaiming our streets as public spaces and turning them into a *piazza* for a period of time. We wondered, could the inspiration we were finding in "Open Streets" lead to a useful and productive conversation in line with the deep inspiration we feel for the Reggio Emilia Approach? Could an "Open Streets" style event provide a useful framework for our school enquiries, a way in which we could better research and connect to our context?



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looking at the world a little more closely by using magnifying glasses and mirrors. They ventured first into the school garden and then into the alleyway below our school to see what treasures they could find together.

Thanks to a parental connection, our oldest children were able to work with Alex Halligey, a theater-maker and postdoctoral fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand's Spatial Analysis and City Planning (SA&CP) unit. Alex works at the intersection of performance art and urban design and uses the arts as a way of collecting and sharing both qualitative and quantitative information about the places she is studying. Together with Alex, Philip Harrison (a Mimosa father who heads up the SA&CP unit), parent volunteers, and children between the ages of six and nine studied two major roads in our neighborhood at different times of the day and on different days, observing who and what can be seen on the streets and what they are doing. They interviewed users of the street including student pedestrians, trash collectors, and local security guards in order to find out how they felt about their neighborhood.

Each time they ventured out onto the street, they then came back in order to collate and share this information with each other in the classroom through different media (for example: data, stories, clay creations, drawings) to get a composite picture of a particular place and space in time. Together, they came away with a richer understanding of the diversity of street life and how the streets are used.

Whatever the research looked like at any age, it involved walking the streets regularly, finding what entranced, delighted, and grabbed the children's curiosity, and then 'projecting forward' from there. Together, we've been turning these observations into documentation. On the day of the "Open Streets" event, we displayed the first fragments of these enquiries using our urban architecture as the canvas for a street exhibition of sorts.

As teachers who are inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach, we've said for some time that we are supposed to be co-researchers alongside the children. However, knowing how that looks for each of us, in our different

[Image 1]

Remembering the freedom of "Open Streets" in graphic form (4 to 5-year-olds).

[Image 2]

Imagining what a street can be, at a workshop with #ArtMylozi and the Trinity Sessions. Photo by Zivanai Matangi.

[Image 3]

Mimosa tots exploring ways of looking with mirrors and magnifying glasses. Photo by Nonkululeko Hlomendini.

[Image 4]

Mimosa's Grade 1s, 2s, and 3s observing uses and users of the street.

[Image 5]

Observing street life.

[Image 6]

Seeing the big picture: Mimosa's Grade 1s, 2s, and 3s collecting their street observations and putting them together.



[7]

ages and stages, has been hazy. Stepping into the unknown of the street forced us to pay closer attention to *what* and *how* the children were experiencing and exploring, and to engage more deeply with how our documentation of these explorations could be used to 'project forward.'

Stepping into the unknown of the street forced us to pay closer attention to *what* and *how* the children were experiencing and exploring, and to engage more deeply with how our documentation of these explorations could be used to 'project forward.'

Our ideas around co-research rooted in other ways. Given our location between two universities, many of our parents work in academia. These parents felt strongly that the "Open Streets" event itself was an ideal opportunity to research the neighborhood, and the impact of the event upon it. Alongside the children's enquiries was an investigation into the event, its philosophical underpinnings, and its inspiration, which included what worked, what didn't, and what we believe its implications to be.

This research has been compiled into a co-written report, which was launched at the University of the Witwatersrand on July 18, 2019 (Browne et al., 2019). It was a real honor and a privilege to work alongside researchers and practitioners from the fields of urban studies, media studies, education, and the City of Johannesburg's transport and development planning departments to co-author the report, and to feel that adults like us had another way of honoring and processing the research the children were already undertaking. In other words, to honor the ways they helped us to be and see.

### Reclaiming the Streets

It was only after our "Open Streets" day on April 7, 2019, and during the writing of the report, that we remembered Loris Malaguzzi used to turn schools inside out – taking children, teachers, and classroom supplies into public squares and "doing school" there. School in the piazza. These acts, to our eyes, were powerfully political. A reclamation. A declaration. "We're here. We matter." It was a way to make children, and the work of the school, more visible, more valued.



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In the South African context, where around 25% of land area in cities is used for roads – even though this space serves “almost exclusively as corridors for vehicular traffic and for installed infrastructure” (Browne et al., 2019) – the act of stepping out onto our streets as part of our ongoing enquiries became a kind of political act. “We’re here. We matter.”

It was as if children took on the role of street ambassadors: greeting strangers they encountered, cheering trash collectors for their work, worrying about litter or broken pipes or pavements found during their journeys (and what they could do about it).

They wondered about the hidden life of a street – for example, do the trees talk to the streetlamps? Is an empty guard hut lonely, and where are its residents now? Are there dinosaur bones down the drain (and is that why it is so smelly)? Walking became an act of co-creation and reclamation, where we all became co-producers of the street experience rather than passive consumers of it.

### Windows Through Walls

When we first started exploring our neighborhood, we had to contend with the reality of Johannesburg’s walls, security fences, and boundaries. With its stark divisions between private and public, welcome and unwelcome, safe and dangerous.

Where we adults might have only seen barriers, the children found possibilities. Their curiosity led them to feel the textures of the walls with their fingers, to peer through cracks and small windows, to find the hidden homes of snails, spiders, and plants, and the patterns found within our urban world such as diamonds, squares, and grids. They used all this information – the texture, pattern, and materiality of the street – to “leap over” the wall with their senses and with their imaginations. They created windows to the other side, picturing trains waiting beyond, ready to take us on new journeys of the imagination. They saw lush jungles in which wild animals such as lions and zebras could roam free.

They opened up possibilities for us as teachers. They opened our eyes. What was a forgotten and run-down alleyway where parents drop their children off each morning has become



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### [Image 7]

Fragments of the children's enquiries, displayed in and around the neighborhood's urban fabric, as part of “Open Streets” Auckland Park. Photo by Chris Anderson.

### [Image 8]

Geoffrey the plastic man puppet, from the Well Worn Theater Company's 2017 *Plastocracy*, photographed on Ditton Avenue, the unofficial *piazza* during “Open Streets” Auckland Park by Mark Straw.

### [Image 9]

Chalk art as declaration and reclamation: Children matter. Photo from “Open Streets” Auckland Park by Chris Anderson.

### [Image 10]

Who lives here? After tracing the crack carefully, and trying to peer through the gaps... “The spiders are living in this hole with all their families.” “No, the crack in the wall shows us another place!” Photo by Tasneem Pochee

### [Image 11]

A crack in the wall. A home for spiders. Spotted by 1 to 3-year-olds and 4 to 5-year-olds alike. Photo by Zohra Mia.

### [Image 12]

What's beyond the wall? Mimosas's 3 to 4-year-olds imagine (in chalk) a world of trains and wild animals! Photo by Jadeija Laurent.

filled with life: snails, flowers, crocodile paths across muddy puddles. A trip into the alleyway has now become a source of excitement and adventure.

Malaguzzi (2001) writes that there is a wall that prevents us from going beyond what we know, but “beyond the wall, there is always a beyond.” Our work as teachers is to look beyond “the wall of habit, of custom, of the normal, of the non-surprise, of assumed security” (p. 6). And with the children’s help, find the possible. Exploring our streets together has been an exercise in the possible. In the “what if.” And also, in the “what is” – what beauty, interest, and possibility is already in our street, which we’ve been missing.

It has made us rethink our relationship with the world around us. We are all spending more time walking, exploring, tending the garden, and generally making better use of our surrounding environment (whether that’s our school garden, surrounding streets, or the people and places in our neighborhood and wider community). We are no longer content with surface readings of things – a cursory look is the adult practice of inattention. The children are teaching us to look a little closer, to linger a little longer, to listen more wholeheartedly. They have shown us there is an abundance of life in the cracks, soil, pipes, and bones under the streets.

We are learning how to look at our surroundings through deep time – to wonder about what it was like here when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, or how our neighborhood might look hundreds of years from now. The children have opened us to the idea that the life of the street has a song all its own: the trees and the leaves have their own language if only we’re prepared to listen.

During this process, we are learning that something does not necessarily need to be pristine or beautiful to adult eyes to be of interest to children. The children are interested in everything, whether it’s litter, drains, construction sites, traffic, pedestrians, and signs both natural and man-made. All are investigated with the utmost curiosity.

It has opened my eyes to see what imagination and ideas have sparked within my group by just taking them to the alley. “Open Streets” have also given the Mimosa



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community a chance to interact with people beyond our gates and to see what lies beyond the Mimosa walls.

- Tasneem Pochee, a Mimosa teacher of children aged 18 months to three years

### A Piazza Called Participation

We are learning that the more you explore your world, the wider your sense of both it and yourself becomes. There is a level of unknown, an openness to the unexpected, to being surprised when you step onto the street or into a public square. There are untold treasures in the soil beneath and the sky above. Serendipity, the role of happy accidents and unexpected encounters, has become a welcome visitor to our enquiries.

Somehow, learning to be open to unexpected surprises has allowed us to become more comfortable with inviting others into our enquiries, where we move beyond the model where the teacher is the ultimate expert and the classroom is his (or her) sole domain.

Somehow, learning to be open to unexpected surprises has allowed us to become more comfortable with inviting others into our enquiries, where we move beyond the model where the teacher is the ultimate expert and the classroom is his (or her) sole domain. Increasingly our work is collaborative as we turn to each other for ideas and insights into the children's learning and processes (and where they might be headed). This participation is not just limited to other educators; it also draws on the insights, ideas, and expertise of parents, interested community members, and researchers at the local universities.

A good example is our gardening group, which is made up of our school caretaker, two



[17]

#### [Image 13]

What's down the drain? And why is it so stinky? The 4 and 5-year-olds regularly wonder whether dead dinosaurs contribute to the smell and are puzzled that the drain sounds like a toilet flushing. Photo by Judith Browne.



[18]

#### [Image 14]

What's below the drain? The 4 and 5-year-olds map their walk and wonder what might be found below the drain. The suggestion of 'water monsters' is first made with words, then in graphic form. Photo by Judith Browne.

#### [Image 15]

What's down the drain? A clay representation of water monsters lurking below the surface of the street. Photo by Judith Browne.

#### [Image 16]

What's below the drain? A group of five and 6-year-old boys imagine a secret street. Here's the world inside the drain... Photo by Photo by Heather Barclay.

#### [Image 17]

Mimosa mom and evolutionary biologist Kelsey Glennon sharing both plants and knowledge at her planting station at "Open Streets" Auckland Park. Photo by Chris Anderson.

#### [Image 18]

Tracking the sun through the garden, so that we know what to plant. Photo by Heather Barclay.

teachers with an interest in permaculture and more sustainable livelihoods, a local permaculture activist, and an evolutionary biologist and parent with a passion for addressing "plant blindness."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A term coined in 1998 by two botanists and biology educators, James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler, plant blindness is the "inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment—leading to (a) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs; (b) the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms belonging to the Plant Kingdom; and (c) the misguided, anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals, leading to the erroneous conclusion that they are unworthy of human consideration (Schussler & Wandersee, 2001)."

Guided by this group's vision for redesigning our garden along more indigenous, sustainable, water-conscious lines, our children are coming into closer contact with the natural world around them. They're composting, tracking the movement of the sun, harvesting seeds from their own lunchboxes to grow in the garden, and learning (and inventing) names for the plants.

The relationships grew among our parents and among the wider community of people and communities through organizing "Open Streets" together. These relationships continue to nourish us. For example, during the "Open Streets" event and thanks to a parental connection, we met local "reclaimers"—men and women who sort through the city's trash to extract what can still be recycled. These people are often treated as a nuisance by the city, or worse, invisible, despite providing an invaluable service.



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South Africa has a recycling rate of just under 60 percent, according to industry studies—a statistic that puts it on par with some European nations. But here, recycling is done by an informal network called 'reclaimers': thousands of men and women who sift through trash to identify recyclables to sell. This vast, labor-intensive system fits with the nation's high unemployment rate, and is, experts argue, a different model of innovation (Powell, 2019).

As teachers, we've started attending meetings with local reclaimers as we try to better understand how our school waste fits into a bigger picture, and what we can do to make the reclaimers' work easier. Serendipitously, this is at a time when academic research (conducted at one of the institutions on our doorstep) on the role of reclaimers in our city's recycling system is becoming more public (Harrisberg, 2019).

Step by step, as our image of our children, ourselves, our environment, and our families continuously shifts, we are learning how to identify the possibilities in people and things.

Step by step, as our image of our children, ourselves, our environment, and our families continuously shifts, we are learning how to identify the possibilities in people and things. We are able to identify our parents' passions more clearly, and to invite them into the school and our enquiries with more success. This is something Tiziana Filippini encouraged us to do during her 2017 visit when she challenged us to offer multiple opportunities for parents and guardians to become involved, to welcome their willingness and their differences. She suggested that infant-toddler centers, preschools, and schools should be seen as learning places for adults too; as we strive to become better teachers, so parents strive to become better parents.

For some, it is easier to be part of or take part in the life of the school by helping with outings; for others, it is easier to come for meetings; still others are prepared to work in the school and to improve the environment. Even in Reggio, it's not easy to get all our parents and guardians to attend meetings—parties are far more popular. Work with each of your parents where they're at, the same as you would do for their children. Many things can be done with the help of parents, but you have to draw this potential out of them by preparing opportunities to meet, to foster information, dialogue, confrontation, offerings that value the knowledge and skills of everyone and promote the shared construction of meaning (Filippini, 2017).

## A Practice of Everyday Democracy

Each time we step out onto the street we are conscious of our need to negotiate freedom and boundaries with our children. How should we behave on the street? What's ok? What's not ok? How do we show that we care and respect others - both human and non-human - in this space? How far should we walk? Should we take this route, or that route? How much do we trust ourselves and each other, and how much do we need clear and established rules before entering the space?

In our journeys beyond the school walls, we become conscious of ourselves, not just as children and teachers, but as pedestrians, street users, citizens - people who have a shared responsibility to keep each other safe, who want to experience a clean and welcoming street (and we began to collect litter as we walked).

This kind of ongoing negotiation is empowering for children as they take the time to sit, discuss, and make agreements or rules together regarding how to participate in the world outside the classroom. As a result, they take a greater sense of ownership of their choices and their actions. It also pushes us teachers outside of our comfort zones and into a space of generative discomfort, where we are evolving our approach and image of children (and what they're capable of) as we work with them each day.

It strengthens our relationships with families, as we test what risks we all feel comfortable taking, thereby slowly becoming less risk-averse and more community-minded.

Working together as teachers, children, and parents in this way isn't easy. It takes time, negotiation, cooperation, and a willingness to change your mind and admit that you're wrong. There is a desire to stay in life's big questions, in the space of "I don't know." A level of comfort, which is only achieved by stepping into discomfort.

Carla Rinaldi (2004) has written beautifully about this in previous editions of *Innovations*:

To be open to the others means to have the courage to come into this room and say, 'I hope to be different when I leave, not neces-

### [Image 19]

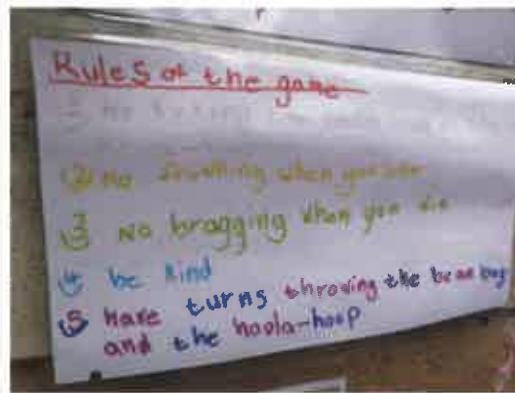
A Well Worn Theater Company granny gets a trolley ride from the African Reclaimers Organization during "Open Streets" Auckland Park. Photo by Ann Simmonds.

### [Image 20]

Alleyway games invented by Mimosa Grades 1, 2, and 3 and shared during "Open Streets" Auckland Park. Photo by Bob van der Vleuten.

### [Image 21]

Rules of a game invented by Mimosa Grades 2 and 3 and shared during "Open Streets" Auckland Park. Photo by Marcel Tsholofeto Korth.



[21]



[20]

sarily because I agree with you but because your thoughts caused me to think differently (p. 3).

Or as one of our 4-year-olds put it, when trying to work his way through a very heated debate among his peers about dinosaurs (as to whether they're truly extinct, or whether they are still with us today, having evolved into chickens and eagles), "we can all think different things."

Being in an ongoing conversation regarding different ways of thinking, being, seeing, and making meaning in the world seems to us like a practice of democracy in the everyday. If we are to recognize children as citizens, we need to look again – not just at the architecture of our homes and cities, as Carla Rinaldi (2013) suggests, but at the very architecture of our relationships.

Which brings us back to Howard Gardner, and the "soil" in which Reggio Emilia's inspiration thrives. What we're finding is that you do not grow good plants, you grow good soil; you do not grow good children, you grow conditions in which the children thrive. And, you do not grow your Reggio Emilia inspired practice without growing your roots, and your connections with who, and what, and where you are.

What makes for rich, loamy soil in a school? For us, it comes down to relationships. To be in conversation, connection, collaboration with ourselves, with each other and the world around us. Below the street, below the surface, an invisible web of relationships holds us in place.

### What is the Role of a School?

We think of school for young children as an integral living organism, as a place of shared lives and relationships among many adults and many children. We think of school as a sort of construction in motion, continuously adjusting itself (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 56).

Either a school is capable of continually transforming itself in response to children, or the school becomes something that goes around and around, remaining in the same spot (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 90).

The more we have walked, and talked, and inquired as to ourselves and our context, the more our image of learning and school has

shifted. Mimosa has always had a socio-political character, a belief that schools should do more than simply reflect society; they should also challenge and begin to actively shape a kinder, more sustainable, more just world in which we can all live. But perhaps, for a time, our vision of learning was more linear. If we were to draw our learning journey now – the one we've seen and have been a part of this year – it would look like a circle, or a cycle, or a spiral, or an infinite progression of infinity signs.

We might live in a city divided, but our lives are connected. We feel what it is that Malaguzzi (1993) describes when he writes of a school as a living organism. As teachers, we can more easily see our role now: to nourish and sustain a rich ecosystem of relationships. For it is in relationships that people flourish and thrive, and it is in relationships that people learn. If a school is a forest, then relationships are the "wood wide web."

In recent days, as we've been thinking about our "Open Streets" inspired enquiry for 2019 in conjunction with our ongoing relationship with the Reggio Emilia Approach, we have had a vision of the school as a compost heap and ourselves as seeds – as we're being turned and turned, parts of ourselves are decomposing while others are reaching upwards toward the light. It is a hopeful, restless vision of a place where the old ways are dying out, and new ways are being born. For as Paolo Freire (2005), a long-time friend of the schools in Reggio writes, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 72).

Who are we? Where are we? More than anything else, we are in a constant state of becoming.



[22]

Being in an ongoing conversation regarding different ways of thinking, being, seeing, and making meaning in the world seems to us like a practice of democracy in the everyday.

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## [Image 22]

Listening and wondering: "The street made a song for us." Isla (5) "So we should make something to say thank you" Kayla (5). But what? Mimosa's Grade 0 group deciding to make a gift for the street: A song. Photo by Mila Gould.