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FILASTROCCA PRESCHOOL IN PISTOIA, ITALY:

Promoting Early Literacy through Books and the Imagination

A Conversation with Alga Giacomelli (Library Teacher),

By Carolyn Pope Edwards and Lella Gandini

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Introduction: *For the past four decades, certain Italian regions and municipalities have been the sources of exceptional new concepts and innovations in early childhood education. Educators, public officials, parents, and general citizens have worked together to build systems of high-quality, public services to support and serve young children and their families. Reggio Emilia, Bologna, Milan, Modena, Parma, Pistoia, San Miniato, and Trento are among the cities of northern and central Italy that have earned particular recognition for their energetic efforts and success stories (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1988; Gandini & Edwards, 2001). While Reggio Emilia has achieved the highest level of international recognition, the other localities are also acknowledged sites of important leadership and experimentation.*

The central Italian city of Pistoia, for example, has put forward a strong concept of the responsibility of public administration to create ways and means to enhance family participation in educational services. Pistoia has pioneered a system of diverse services and resources to reach out across the generations and segments of the city and communicate children’s needs and a positive view of childhood. The system includes traditional child care centers, parent/child preschool programs, after school enrichment classes, and Area Bambini (“Children’s Areas”) with workshops that specialize in such areas as storytelling and oral tradition, nature and environment, computers and technology, and the visual and manual arts (Galardini, Giovannini, & Iozelli, 1999).

Pistoia is a small city in the region of Tuscany, a short train ride from Florence, with a population of about 90,000 people. It is an agricultural and industrial center and a provincial capital. Its main industries included the construction of city busses and subway cars from 1960 to 1994 that were exported also in the United States. More recently the city wealth is supported by the highly developed growing of plants and flowers exported all over Europe and the manufacture of leather and metal goods, glass, textiles, and footwear. The city rose to prominence in the 12th and 13th centuries, and its citizens made important contributions to architecture and sculpture.

Filastrocca Preschool opened in 1970 under the name of Fornaci (“Furnaces”), the name of the neighborhood in which it was located where there was a large factory that produced and fired bricks. This is a section of the city that contains many new and poor residents from other areas of the country who are relatively disadvantaged and who may need special support with respect to acquiring and passing on to their children the skills leading to educational and economic advancement. The Fornaci Preschool was totally renovated and enlarged in 1990 and renamed Filastrocca (“Nursery Rhymes”). To name the school, teachers asked all the children who had previously attended the school to send in names and drawings about what to call it. The name, Filastrocca, was a favorite, and an image of Mago (“Magician,” or “Wizard”) was chosen as a symbol of the school. Filastrocca enrolls about 75 children aged 3 to 5 years old, in three equal age groups. There are six teachers and three assistants, plus a cook, and the school is open from 7:30 in the morning to 4:00 in the afternoon.

Alga Giacomelli (Library Teacher): Before telling you about Filastrocca, let me explain that I have been at this school for over twenty years. I received my teacher training at an *istituto magistrale* (secondary school for teachers) because it was always my first wish to be a teacher. Later I earned a diploma in pedagogy. I originally intended to teach elementary, but in order to get work, I started at a municipal child care center and then never thought of leaving because I found that I loved working with kids aged three to six.

So I have been at Filastrocca a long time. Let me explain how over the years we have shaped our school’s identity in a way that values the identity of the children. With that as a starting point, we have worked on the school’s educational profile. We want to involve the families in our work and weave meaningful relationships that value everyone’s abilities, heritages, and traditions. We draw on the contributions of all the adults—teachers, staff, parents—in creating a shared direction to make the school a true learning community. It is a community that gives importance to rediscovering traditions and valuing the stories of the grandparents. We are stimulated by the traditional material that families have offered the school, and then we return it enriched with new meaning.

Lella Gandini: The school is open to the special traditions of your region, Tuscany. This part of Italy is famous for its story telling tradition and commitment to children’s literature and fairy tales. It is hard to say when work on fairy tales began in the preschools of Pistoia, but it grew out of teacher experimentation that prepared for the

establishment of an after-school laboratory called *Di Bocca in Bocca* (“From Mouth to Mouth”) that I helped set up for elementary children. This laboratory involved the children in gathering and analyzing traditional tales and nursery rhymes from their parents and grandparents.¹ This recovery of oral tradition is a way of communicating in which the adult, the repository of culture, transmits it to the child through the story, which is itself geared to the cognitive capacity of the children. The goal is to involve the children actively, through the plot of the story, the description of the characters, and the power of narrative, and thus to open the way to discuss with them the interesting and problematic aspects of the tales.

Alga Giacomelli: Filastrocca has its own reading laboratory that has been active the past twenty years. It is called *Paging through the Rainbow*, which reminds us of the Magician with his magic wand which streams a band of rainbow colors. The Magician is connected in our minds with the reading laboratory, which involves all the children and their families in literacy and book borrowing. He is a big character made of papier-mâché, built by parents several years ago, located at the front door of the school. He symbolizes for the children and adults the sense of belonging to a community with a specific personality. The entryway is like the Magician’s living room, and it is here on the first day of school that children gather to wait for their parents. They tell their parents of their accomplishments and receive their first surprise, a gift of a pin with a picture of the Magician. Their friendship with the Magician is enriched in later days, and they interact with this character and also join in stories and songs dedicated to him. The school environment is accented in his special colors, the purple of his outfit and the rainbow colors that come out of his wand.

Carolyn Edwards: You have a booklet for parents called *First Days at Filastrocca* that describes the introduction process for children and families. It tells how next to the front door there is a little square window, the Magician’s Window, at the children’s eye level where they can view the parking lot outside. At the window every morning children and parents say goodbye, blow a kiss, and share other gestures of affection. This is also the spot where children come to look for their parents driving into the school in the afternoon to pick them up. So I would imagine that this spot is charged with the reassuring sense of connection and continuity between home and school.

Alga Giacomelli: Filastrocca is a welcoming school that pays attention and listens to the children and seeks to promote their well-being and independence. We place trust in the children in order to gain their trust, establish an atmosphere full of respect and affection, and foster a harmonious development. Thoughts become affection; without affection there is no thought. The familiar relationships established among the children and their sharing of experiences foster a common group life that is affectionate and relaxed.

¹ The storytelling laboratory is led by Marisa Schiano, an actress and storyteller, who is seen telling a story about Nicolino, a handsome prince turned into a frog, on our video (*Bambini: Early Care and Education in Pistoia, Italy, A Child Friendly City*, GPN, 2003). Marisa is often invited to perform at school celebrations and city celebrations.

From the first encounter, the school also introduces the parents to the way of life inside the school so that they can actively participate with consciousness. We try to give to every parent *confidence* in the school and the confirmation of *listening* to the characteristics and needs of the child.

Lella Gandini: Tell us about the spaces in your school. We know that all of you did a great deal of reflecting and working in re-designing the school when it was enlarged. You are so aware of the importance of continuity, and yet also of the value of novelty and surprise for children and parents.

Alga Giacomelli: The classrooms of the school are special spaces that structure the daily life of each group of children and divide their day through the games, rituals, and routines take place there. These spaces are full of little signs of the children and reflect their faces in the photographs on the attendance poster, the mirrors placed around the play centers, and their names on the crafts they have made. The spaces speak about the children and invite the children to view themselves and their peers and become self-aware. They also reflect the children's images through their self-portraits and stories that maintain and reinforce their unique characteristics. The spaces confirm and promote a family environment among children and adults. They are "shelter" spaces that reinforce a sense of belonging but they are not closed. Their permeability promotes explorations and adventures outside the classroom and welcomes others to come in. They foster learning that is not instrumental and stereotyped and development that is integrated across cognitive, emotional, and social levels.

Carolyn Edwards: The last time I visited the 3-year-old group called themselves the Bears, the 4-year-olds were the Horses, and the 5-year-olds were Lions and Lionesses. How did the classroom groups get these names?

Alga Giacomelli: Each child and each classroom has a symbol identified from the games, book readings, and conversations with the children, selected among the many images that can be found. The symbols become tools for child growth beyond communicating a collective identity. They also help the children construct a personal identity that has a collective dimension. The group identity does not make everybody uniform but instead helps all the children find themselves in a group that accepts and celebrates each person's uniqueness.

Rituals are another aspect of the collective life making experience more consistent and coherent for children by providing soothing repetition of gestures, actions, and words. Through rituals the children discover stable borders around the flux of changing events. You have heard about the ritual of going to the little window in the entryway, and this becomes part of the common knowledge body of the whole group of children. Shared experiences encourage cooperation and are a source of support. The children are protagonists in a daily action rich and full of meaning.

Another important moment during the daily flow of time is the Morning Circle. The children and teachers sit together in their classroom with the chairs arranged in a circle. This signifies that everyone, adults included, has the same distance to get to a common goal and symbolically stands for a small society founded on agreement. Children discuss together an event, a problem, or something curious. The new day begins, and the threads of meaning are tied together with the experiences of that specific group of children. Games are played. “Who’s There?” is an attendance-taking game that consists of putting the photo or symbol of each child in the appropriate space on a big chart, when the teacher or a child says the name of the child mate. The leadership for this game gradually shifts from the teacher, at the beginning of the year, to the children, who learn to take turns in determining exactly what happens. Another game is “Weekly Chores: I Am in Charge of This!” that encourages the children to assume part of the responsibility, to put themselves in others’ shoes and participate actively in the use of spaces and materials. Each classroom has a chart prepared with photos of the daily chores, and as the children grow older from age 3 to 5, they gradually take on chores increasing in effort and responsibility.

Carolyn Edwards: The Parent Handbook tells how the teachers of the youngest group prepare the classroom for the new children’s first day. Could you tell us more about it?

Alga Giacomelli: The teachers hang photos with the name of the children in capital letters and little clear bags decorated with a little purple bow. They prepare a closet next to the classroom where each child places the decorated box that was given to the parents at a meeting before the start of school with the request to decorate it for the first day of school. Sometimes these boxes come in already full of things: a little doll, toy car, book, or other things that remind the child of home and the family who may feel far away. From the first day the children go and get their things to show their friends. Soon the boxes become places to put things the children find and make at school: a piece of colored paper, drawing for mom, or first presents from friends. Often when the child arrives at school in the morning, he brings things to put in his box and then he goes and tells his friend. And sure enough, they meet at the closet to go through the contents of their boxes together. Therefore, the box becomes a special private space to share with others.

Mother and Father of Leonardo (from the Parent Handbook): What surprised us entering the school has been the organization. They take ideas from situations the children encounter every day, and go from individual experience or from common interests and then follow a logical path to a single final project.

Alga Giacomelli: We have worked out a strategy that makes the children feel at home and introduces another familiar, reassuring presence in our school. On the first day of school, the youngest children form a circle with the small chairs where everybody, adults and children, meet to talk, sing and tell a little story and to welcome the character friend, Hannibal Mouse. Who is Hannibal? He is a funny little puppet, made of soft fabric and dressed like a child, who often comes to visit school in the morning. Hannibal

Mouse is not merely a puppet animated by the adult hand; rather, he becomes a friend who is able to emotionally engage children and create moments of anticipation and joy. He is funny and brings surprises. He knows the children's names and can draw out the quietest children. He tells about stories of daily life, his misfortunes, his adventures with his wife, Caroline, and maybe it's those detailed stories that make him so close to the children's experiences; they live, through his words, events similar to theirs, and they have fun and they are reassured. He provides a common element to the collective memory of each group of children, enriching imagination and stimulating verbal and listening skills. Hannibal corresponds by letter with the children using a mailbox near the youngest children's classroom. Parents also play along and bring to school presents for Hannibal, such as small clothes and toys. They have become their children's secretaries and advise them in preparing letters for Hannibal; sometimes they are also "accomplices" and write response message from Hannibal which they place in the mailbox or on their child's bed.

Irene, child (from the Parent Handbook): I remember Alga who prepared magic potions and that rascal Hannibal Mouse and his wife Caroline who used to make a lot of bad jokes. I'm wondering, what happened to my pacifier?

Lella Gandini: Besides the classrooms, the school has many other spaces that make it special to the children and parents. I am referring again to the many changes in the school that I have seen over the years.

Alga Giacomelli: The Magician's window, the Castle for going outside into the yard, the room devoted to the exploration of light and shadow, and the room where artifacts of old projects are stored are among the spaces that underscore the magic and fantastic aspects of the design of space and activities. The rainbow is a decorative element that appears in many places in the school, including the reading laboratory.

Mother of Martina (from the Parent Handbook): The most intense sensation that I can remember, related to the preschool, refers to the first time that I entered the school. I don't remember the reason why I was alone, without my daughter, but I walked across the entrance hall and along the long hall onto which the rooms opened for the different activities. I remember the nice smell of children and other familiar fragrances. I had the impression of being in a home-school custom made for children, whose presence came to me from the work displayed along the walls and in the rooms. I was fascinated by the arrangement of the rooms, where in every space, from the type of furnishings they had, I could imagine the type of activity they hosted. I began picturing Martina rolling upon the little mattress or in front of the mirror playing dress-up the way she likes so much. But also the child part of me seemed to be awakening. I felt emotional, and I thought with satisfaction and tranquility that my daughter would be fine here.

Alga Giacomelli: The Rainbow Library, as the children call it, is a space used by all children in the school, in groups, at different times and in different ways. But it is the older children who feel responsible and change the play centers and activities. It is they who sort the books at the beginning of each year and order them in color coded categories

("houses," or compartments) on the book shelves. The older children also have charge of the book lending program, which depends on their judgment, appreciation, and ability to explain things. They choose what symbol to use in "book reviews" to most adequately express the intensity of the reviewer's feelings. For example, the heart: there would be one heart for "a lot," two hearts for "a lot, a lot," and so on. The older children have laid down the rules for using the library, such as, "On Friday you borrow a book. On Monday you return the book. At home you read it with your Dad, your Mom, or your Grandmother. You take care of the book; you put it away on a shelf, and you read it, you don't throw it in the air, you don't throw it on the floor, you don't tear the pages, you don't write in it, you don't argue with your little brother over the book."

It is in this friendly, cooperative environment of the Rainbow Library that the pleasure of reading develops among children. The parents participate too, by borrowing books with their children, and by taking part in activities to read stories or create books with their children. Our program has been designed around fairy tales, because of the potentialities they offer.

Carolyn Edwards: Can you describe the sequence of events that might take place in the Rainbow Library on a typical day?

Alga Giacomelli: I will tell you about the morning that your team recorded in making the video (*Bambini: Early Care and Education in Pistoia, Italy, A Child Friendly City*, GPN, 2003). That morning a group of five-year-olds came to the library. We first went through the ritual where two children have their turn to wear a heart sticker that signifies friendship and happiness for being together and that distinguishes them that day. Their job is to help the others and to stamp a heart on the others' hands, so their parents know they have all been to the library that day. They also put materials away and clean up. So, once the children arrived, we told them what we are going to do that day. That week we were reading a book called *The Very Busy Spider*, by Eric Carle. He had been a recent special guest of our city and visitor to our schools in Pistoia. So, on the previous day I had read the children the story, and since they really liked it, I had suggested they make a small book to take home. We had prepared the inside pages of the book. Now, this day, I read them the story again. The kids told me their own opinions about the book and began making covers for their own books. We used a mixture of materials from a pretend store, where the children choose and "buy" (just saying an amount) their supplies for their covers. One girl who could write had copied the title of the book, and this was photocopied for all the children to cut up and put on their own covers. You can see exactly what happens in the *Bambini* video.

Carolyn Edwards: I was present at Filastrocca that day, and I remember seeing the Lion group troop happily into the Rainbow Library to discuss the Eric Carle book. You had an animated conversation with the children about the spider story, talking back and forth with them about how spiders spin their webs using a special "saliva," the number of legs a spider has, how the web gets gradually bigger and bigger, what spiders eat versus what children eat, which specific pages of the book the children liked best, and other interesting topics. After the discussion, the children spent a long time making their

covers. The children “bought” their supplies by saying amounts they would “pay” (this helps them develop concepts of number), and I was amused by a little boy named Nicholas who wanted to pay “100 million Lire” (roughly 100 thousand U.S. dollars) for his supplies. You kindly told him that would be too much, and he should pay “100 Lire” instead. The children chatted to one another as they worked and went off to play elsewhere as they finished. Each of the children’s covers turned out differently, and all seemed pleased with their creations.

Alga Giacomelli: The school is a place of value for positive relationships between adults and children. Friendship is an important experience in the life of children, and they have a right to not be alone. Working with children on the issue of friendship has been fundamental to our school, and the design of spaces promotes the activity, competence, and autonomy of the peer groups and promotes children’s desires to be together and make new discoveries in the company of friends. Through listening to the words of children, we get a portrait of the “research” that children undertake in the delicate and profound world of their emotions. Children need time to get to know each other and build positive relationships. Children become interested in what their friends are doing, and this enriches their own experience and increases their positive behavior and cooperation. The project, “December, the Friendly Month,” focuses on friendship through a program of activities and meetings that highlight the children’s friendships as well as the relationships between children and adults.

Lella Gandini: I have witnessed many means that are used to strengthen the ties to parents and grandparents, including individual conferences, home visits, cooperation on practical activities, meetings in small and medium groups, and questionnaires. The parents sometimes have conversations with teachers at meetings to discuss and plan initiatives at the school. There are work evenings devoted to realization of elaborate projects. Before the beginning and after the first few weeks of school for a new child, there are individual interviews with parents to collect news, habits, and impressions. The grandparents have built wooden toys (trains, boxes, and cars), fabric toys and dolls, or objects of straw. They have played traditional games with children, such as bingo and *zoppettino*. They also participate in the narration of stories and fairy tales, followed by expressive experiences with language, drawing and painting, movement, or drama.

Alga Giacomelli: Children cannot develop and grow harmoniously if their school and home are two separate worlds; their home and school lives need to come together to create the days of their lives. School and family must act in a synergetic relationship, in order to maintain the continuity of children development.

Mr. Burchietti, father of Isacco (from the *Bambini* video): In the twenty years we have been associated with Filastrocca through our four children, we have been learning new things all the time. We are different parents now with Isacco, our youngest. For example, Isacco is a really particular child, very shy and reserved. Now he has become much more involved in all the class activities. The teacher helped us help Isacco. You see, every socioeconomic level offers diverse children where everyone works

together to help integrate the kids, like making a good soup. Everyday they work with something, some program, some problem to solve together, little by little.

Mrs. Burchietti, mother of Isacco (from the *Bambini* video): We have grown up together with our children, and it is easier this way, we are learning together. Plus, we can talk to the other parents and teachers because we all work together. One can see other possibilities, and we have support for our own problems we might be having.

Alga Giacomelli: Parents are an integral part of the school community and contribute to its daily life, organization, and projects. Without their help, the oldest group could not construct the costumes or the papier-mâché puppets that they will use to act out the fairy tale they create each year. The final play, animated by the parents (as actors or puppeteers), is dramatically enacted at the school or outside in the open fields, squares, and streets of the city. It is one of the most important moments in the school life, because the children can see their ideas and projects realized. Others, not involved with the school, volunteer their time to help with this party. This experience remains in the child's mind. This and other experiences give a good basis on which the children can evaluate and give value to other things in their life.

Mother of Alice (from the Parent Handbook): When I sent Alice to this school, I made a choice because of the education of the teachers. In everything there was a clear purpose. I never would have imagined that these games would transform into something fantastic and I would be so involved that I could live in first person these fairy-tale moments not for my daughter, but with her. Above all, between us parents there was a really positive spirit of collaboration that made the children feel comfortable, in a continuity between home and school, like two familiar environments that interact with each other.

Carolyn Edwards: It is clear that Filastrocca Preschool has all the features that North Americans look for in a "literacy-rich environment." The classrooms are rich in environmental print, and there is a plentiful supply of books and pictures. The children have access to writing materials and tools of all kinds, as well as tools that promote communication, such as message boards and mail boxes. There are display areas and containers to share and store the children's work, and there are many literacy props for dramatic play. The teachers take advantage of planned instructional times and teachable moments to hold extended conversations with children that provide them with new information and vocabulary and help them think about things beyond the immediate here and now. These conversations take place in many contexts throughout the day, such as daily routines, book reading and story telling, in situations such as explanatory discussions about everyday situations and events, explorations of nature, free and pretend play, and greetings and departures. The children hear books read to them at school and home, and they publish many of their own. All these opportunities combine to promote the children's concept- and language development and their readiness for primary school.

Beyond all these expected features of the literacy-rich environment, however, there is also something more. People who visit Filastrocca Preschool are struck by the special emphasis on the imagination of children that gives a beautiful and unique flavor

to this approach to literacy. The teachers at Filastrocca do not apply a mechanical, repetitive, pre-planned style that puts acquiring prescribed skills in front of the excitement and pleasure of reading. Instead, they incorporate good literacy teaching into activities that draw their flair and vibrancy from the children's interests and the homes and traditions of the neighborhood, city and region.

As Lella has mentioned, Tuscany is a region of Italy that has always been a rich source of folklore and literature. Just to give one example, the famous children's story, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, was written in 1881 by Carlo Collodi, an author who lived in a small Tuscan town not too far from Pistoia, and this book is still popular today. Children all over Italy still read the original story and play with toy representations of the little wooden puppet who has become so well loved around the world.

Thus, in my view, the Filastrocca educators employ many parallels to American theories of emerging literacy, but the school draws our attention and admiration for the way it turns everyday routines into special moments that integrate parents, grandparents, and the city. Books, stories, and the imagination are transformed into vehicles that renew everyone's interest and create a unique mindset about learning. Let's not forget that many of these children come from backgrounds with social and economic problems and educational disadvantages, yet they flourish at the school. The school is understood as a neighborhood and community asset in tapping the learning potential of these children.

Lella Gandini: The way that the tradition of storytelling is used at Filastrocca and other schools in Pistoia gives the folk tradition new value. The work promotes children's emotional development because through storytelling and dramatization they experience powerful empathy toward the story characters. The children project their emotions into the plot. They use language and their voices in new and subtle ways. They feel positive attention directed toward themselves both as individuals and as members of a group; and in many other ways grow in maturity. And then the activities of symbolic representation--the invention and re-invention of stories through many symbolic languages (including drawing, oral narration, constructing books, acting out, singing, and dancing)--all of this surely adds to the learning landscape of the school.

The particular methods of telling and acting out of stories that you, Alga, have described are very appropriate in the context of Pistoia. While I do not expect that they would necessarily be so meaningful in other places or traditions, that issue is not what is important. The significant thing is that you have discovered your own particular ways to create a living culture of the school that can find support from the parents, the public, and the city administration. This gives visible recognition to the children, protecting them from alienation and marginality.

Alga Giacomelli: We believe that children need to work out their reality through their imaginary world in order to be able to acquire an adequate sense of reality. The discussion of fairy tale characters with their unrealistic characteristics, their magic objects and properties, allows this exploration. In following the narrative form of the fairy tale, the children are then also asked to invent collective stories in which each child gives a personal contribution to the unfolding of the plot in which each child makes a personal

contribution to the unfolding of the plot. In these stories the children tend to insert situations that stir their curiosity or worry them.

We favor a social, collective dimension to this creativity that is different from the academic structure of primary school which can be rigid and restrictive. The imagination and the collective creativity give the possibility of a very intense and personal communication among children and between children and adults. We believe in giving attention to the children's need to channel their hopes and fears into expressions that are acceptable to them and that they can control through graphic representation, devising characters, dressing up, dramatizing the story, and so on. The children grapple with the problems of translating mental images into concrete forms, problems that require solutions for the completion of the project. There is no separation between the creative or expressive area and the cognitive—the children use all the aspects of their knowledge to construct their own growth process. That is the “space of identity” our school stands for.

Claudia, child (from the Parent Handbook): I'll never forget anyone or anything about those three years and particularly not the teachers who helped me to begin my life.

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