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# Recognizing School as a Place of Learning for All

## From Infancy through Graduate School

by Alison Maher and Lori Ryan

Ruth and Arthur, ages 11 and 12 months old, visit the studio space for the first time. There, they encounter a beautiful landscape of reclaimed materials, collected by families and community members. The backdrop for the materials is a projected video of fish swimming, animals with which the children are quite familiar, as there are fish living in their classroom located just down the hall.

In the studio, the infants closely observe, touch, and mouth the materials. Their strong desire to learn is evident. They shake the materials, tap them on the floor, place some inside of others, carefully calculating size and scale. They are experimenting with the physical characteristics of tangible

materials—such as plastic, paper, and metal—but also those of intangible materials—light, projection, and shadow. Ruth finds a water pitcher that she lifts to her mouth and pretends to drink. She giggles, as if she sees humor in her interpretation that the pitcher could serve as a large drinking cup.

Ruth and Arthur observe each other, already familiar and trusting of one another. They examine how the other is approaching the space and the materials and, at times, integrate the approach of the other into their own.

Alongside Arthur and Ruth are their teachers, resident teacher Shelby Jelly and studio teacher Jacie Engel. The teachers prepare the studio, considering the previous experiences of the children, to create a new space that is welcoming, interesting and challenging. They intentionally design a space that is open and flexible, filled with loose parts, as an invitation for the children to add their thoughts to the original design. The environment both invites participation and is the result of participation among the children and adults.

Jelly and Engel plan to document the children's thinking and their own thinking, simultaneously, using notes, photos, and video. They hope to better understand the children's learning processes, as well as their own processes of documentation. Initially, in the moment with the children, Engel wonders if she is doing enough, or "teaching" enough. She reminds herself that observation and offering time and space for children's participation are strategies for teaching. Engel is in awe of the children's ability to be present and is open to the ways they can inspire her.

*"The ways in which children encounter the newness of life is astounding to me. They make me want to be this way too—to*



Alison Maher is the executive director at Boulder Journey School, where she has worked for 28 years. Boulder Journey School is known worldwide for innovation in both early childhood education and teacher education. The school is deeply inspired by the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and has developed a translation of their approach that is contextual to Colorado. Part of Maher's role at the school is to organize graduate programs and online courses through a partnership with the University of Colorado

Denver. She serves on the boards for Hawkins Centers of Learning and Watershed School and on the advisory committee for Ideal Learning. Maher has worked as a consultant in a wide variety of public and private schools in the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, and Ireland.



Lori Ryan, Ph.D., is clinical associate professor at the University of Colorado Denver's school of education and human development. Ryan's teaching, research, and coaching focus on promoting equitable and inclusive practices in early childhood and educational leadership. She explores the capacity of teachers and leaders, who in partnership with their communities and contexts, study, learn, and together promote a strong image of children and families as

co-constructors of their own learning stories. She serves as lead faculty in CU Denver's master's degree in partnership with Boulder Journey School and represents the school of education and human development in the roles of participating founder of the Fondazione Reggio Children Loris Malaguzzi Center and on the Ph.D. Board of Reggio Childhood Studies.

*encounter the world, as it unfolds, with embodied presence."*

—Jacie Engel, Studio Teacher

Initially, Jelly focuses on helping the infants feel comfortable in this new space, learning from them if and when her support is requested. She also observes how the children co-construct learning with one another. She documents their actions and their thinking to share with the families later, so that they, too, can participate in this learning experience.

*"After attending a virtual Reggio Emilia study group organized by Reggio Children, I noticed in a video how the educators in Reggio Emilia encouraged the children to observe what their peers were doing. I was working to make this a part of my teaching practice."*

—Shelby Jelly, Resident Teacher

As teacher educators studying this documentation, we listen to what Arthur and Ruth are teaching us about young children's capacity for learning, their creative spirit, and their ability to connect with the world around them. We are also attentive to what Engel and Jelly are teaching us about the role of the teacher as listener, and the value of being vulnerable and human.

We begin to consider how this moment can be shared with others, and how it could inspire coursework. In this documented experience, we see the teachers acknowledging that even our youngest citizens are worthy of participation. We find this incredibly powerful, because it means that all human beings are worthy of participation. We wonder, could these infants and these teachers inspire other educators to slow down, be more present, and invite more participation? And, how can acknowledging the rights of the child be a strategy for acknowledging the rights of all?

In the documentation captured and synthesized by the teachers, we also notice the infants' competencies as they integrate the virtual and physical worlds around them, created by the projection onto the walls and materials. We become hopeful that, if young children are able to access advanced technologies and fully participate in these digital experi-

ences, their participation can support us all in developing healthy relationships with the modern world. We wonder, how can we more fully acknowledge children's right to participate in the development of these technologies and their applications?

### Full Partners in an Educational Journey

The studio experience described above unfolded at Boulder Journey School, a school that has been in close partnership with the University of Colorado Denver since 1999. This experience, just one small moment in the life of the school and the life of the university, is co-constructed among children, families, educators, and teacher educators, and reflects the potential of active participation, a concept first introduced to us by educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Boulder Journey School is a full-day, full-year early childhood program located in Boulder, Colorado, that welcomes over 200 children, ages 6 weeks to 5 years, and their families. Boulder Journey School faculty is composed of resident teachers who are enrolled in a master's program of study at the University of Colorado Denver, mentor teachers, a studio teacher, directors, administrators, and teacher educators. The







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School of Education and Human Development at The University of Colorado Denver focuses on educational issues and socially-just solutions with diverse communities. Through innovative research and partnerships, the university faculty strive to be passionate agents of change, inspiring upcoming generations to learn from the past and shape the future. The partnership with Boulder Journey School cultivates practices within the school of education and human development, and helps to realize its vision toward equitable and accessible learning communities, with the intention to catalyze new possibilities to emerge in diverse contexts. Our partnership has evolved as the result of two decades of experimentation and innovation that have strengthened our image of the child, the family and the educator, expanded our perspectives on pedagogy, curriculum and learning, and enhanced our connections to local and global educational communities.

Instrumental to our partnership is our decades-long study of the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The educators in Reggio Emilia have developed a strong understanding of teaching and learning that is not only applicable to young children. Known for their ability to apply theory to practice and to use practice to create new theories, the educators in Reggio Emilia offer their ever-developing philosophy and pedagogy to the world. As we educate students ages 6 weeks to over 60 years of age, we find the Reggio

Emilia Approach is a philosophy of life and learning that transcends age, and we embrace the approach as a way of engaging with all members of the community. To deepen our relationship with educators in Reggio Emilia, Boulder Journey School and the University of Colorado Denver attend the Students and Professors Study Group annually and have become participating founders of the Fondazione Reggio Children - Centro Loris Malaguzzi, an international organization with the mission to “promote solidarity through research.”

Together, we currently offer a wide variety of professional opportunities for educators around the world, including online courses available to the public for professional develop-

ment, a three-course Certificate in Early Childhood Pedagogy, a one-year Residency and Licensure program, and a fully online graduate program. Each of these opportunities centers around classroom documentation that supports and challenges educators to seek inspiration from both the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia and from Boulder Journey School, while interpreting and creating their own experiences of quality in their contexts around the world.

When we develop coursework that engages teachers in the process of documentation, we offer the opportunity to improve the quality of classroom experiences now, as opposed to in the future. We see all educators—new educators and experienced educators, classroom teachers and university professors—as change agents. We all are the leaders who can help envision, create and shape a new image of education.

The partnership between the school and the university allows us to cross perceived barriers between practitioners and professors in the field of education. This reciprocity among educators presents a situation where preschool teachers and university professors are working side by side. This organization challenges the traditional structure of teacher education, where there can be separation between universities and schools, and thus, more separation between theory and practice. All voices are invited and heard in a more equitable approach toward learning.

We are full partners in this educational journey, and share a paradigm and practice that all educators are learners. University faculty join graduate students as action researchers, whose learning process is enhanced by the processes of listening and documentation of moments like those described in the studio with two infants. This openness and curiosity is grounded in one of our pedagogical design principles, dissonance, that we define as the value of uncertainty. For us, as teacher educators, being uncertain creates space for learning and growth. When we join our students in this space of uncertainty, we are forced to critically examine, evaluate, and make meaning of theory, of practice, and of our experiences. Holding the expectation that we, alongside our students, will encounter dissonance, invites an openness that can lead to solutions that have yet to be discovered and that have the potential to contribute to more complex thinking and understandings. This shared perspective on learning and teaching informs our course development, that is continually inspired by new curiosities, new perspectives and a high level of participation of the children and the graduate students, with whom we learn each and every day.

And, we are honored to be members of a world-wide community of learners inspired by the educators and researchers in Reggio Emilia, including our colleagues who have also contributed to this collection on unique interpretations of the Reggio Approach. Our experience of over two decades of evolving a Reggio inspired school-university partnership that centers children as a source of adult learning brings us much joy and optimism for the future. We are in awe of the work of our graduate students, who offer us the most beautiful view into childhood here in Colorado and across the globe. For us, learning is actively constructed through meaningful experiences shaped by each learner's unique context and culture in relationship with others. The perspectives of children and adult learners together offer possibilities for us to articulate, debate, and experiment with understandings and misunderstandings as shared learning partners. In this way, the learning of the community—in this case graduate students, children, mentor teachers, school directors, teacher educators, and families—exceeds the learning of each individual. We invite you to join us on this socially constructed learning journey. We are curious about your experiences and know they will enrich ours.



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A master's student set the following intentions for her participation in our teacher education program:

*"I believe the cultural space of the school is a significant and lively part of wider cultural landscapes, locally and internationally. Children have fascinating things to say to adults, in many languages, and adults have fascinating ways to communicate with children in return. I am looking forward to developing new forms of this exchange during my studies and will bring a culturally open, engaged mindset to group work, along with a willingness to question my own assumptions and approach."*

