

## Preface: Writing a New Story

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*It is through stories that we weave reality.*

--- The Dark Mountain Manifesto (1)

### A story, from Ann ...

Energized by my first couple years of teaching 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds in a child care center, I applied to graduate school, eager to better understand the ways of children and the underpinnings of the child care and early education arenas. I enrolled in the PhD program at a well-regarded university and moved to the Midwest, keen to dive in. I loved being in school; I relished the study of educational philosophy, of theories about teaching and learning, of child development and family systems, of the historical roots of child care in labor struggles and second wave feminism. But even as I savored the rigorous coursework and wide-ranging intellectual conversations, I missed my days with young children. I realized that I didn't want to make a life in higher education; I was captivated by the practice of early education, and was eager to return to the joyful challenge of learning side by side with children.

I re-routed myself from the PhD to the Master's track, filing the necessary paperwork to shift my course of study. The forms chugged their way through various required offices, until they landed on the desk of the department chairperson for final approval—and landed me a summons. The head of the department called me into her office to chastise me, and to urge me to reconsider my change in plans. “You're smart,” she said, “and you're going to waste your intelligence and your education by working with children. Do you really think you'll make an impact on children's lives by working in child care? Stay in the academy and do research; that's the way to make a difference.”

This moment in the department chairperson's office was clarifying and consequential; it laid out a potent story about early childhood education, laden with assumptions, values, and convictions. *Early childhood educators needn't be “smart” or “educated”; they have no use for theory, history, cultural study, or political and social analyses. Children's bright, loud, untidy lives are secondary in value to the order and precision of scholarly research. The work of caring for young folks happens in an intellectual ghetto, removed from the impactful, erudite life of the academy.*

What reality does this story weave? A reality that has come to dominate our field, in which curriculum is created to be “teacher-proof” because teachers are seen as the weak link

between learning goals and measurable achievement on assessments. A reality in which professional development is focused on health and safety mandates, compliance issues, and accountability to state rating systems. A reality in which children's days are overrun with activities that orient them towards learning outcomes on which they'll be evaluated in the name of "quality."

What happens if we reimagine our work and tell a different story? What other reality might we access, what other meaning might we make of our work, of children's lives?

### **The setting for this story is Italy, 1945 ...**

The Second World War is over; the fascist dictator of Italy, Benito Mussolini, is dead. The country is physically shattered and the people are emotionally and psychologically worn down. Worn down, but not broken, for in that devastated country was the strong political will that sustained the Resistance and that will fuel the rebuilding of Italy.

In the spring of 1945, the citizens of Reggio Emilia, a small town in northern Italy, came together determined to remake their community in such a way that the fascism that had led to their country's disintegration would not find a foothold again. They scraped together the few resources available in their devastated village: an army tank, six horses left by the retreating Germans, and three trucks. They sold these, which gave them some initial funds. They salvaged bricks and beams from bombed houses and began to build a school on land that a farmer donated—the first secular school in Italy—a school run not by the church or the state, but created by and in service to the community. This was the community's response to the danger of totalitarianism and tyranny: create a school for the youngest children.

Here's how Loris Malaguzzi, the first teacher in that first school, describes the beginning: "Finding support for the school in a devastated town, rich only in mourning and poverty, would be a long and difficult ordeal, and would require sacrifices and solidarity . . . rage and strength to survive."(2)

What sort of teaching and learning would take place in this school founded to oppose fascism? It would, by necessity, emphasize critical dialogue, collaboration, subjectivity, and inquiry. What would be the goal of this educational project? Nothing less than changing history. Malaguzzi, again: "We are part of an ongoing story of men and women, ideals intact, who realize that history can be changed, and that it is changed starting with the future of children."(3)

What did this beginning feel like? This ambitious project to change history by creating a new way of teaching and learning? Here's how Malaguzzi describes the first teachers: "Their thoughts were ample and greedy and their energy boundless. . . We felt both enthusiasm and fear . . . We were able to imagine the great challenge, but we did not yet know our own capabilities nor those of the children."(4)

From these beginnings grew the schools that we know of today in Reggio. There was more activism done to garner the support of the city government: parents and teachers held school on the stairs of city hall, and in the central piazza, and in city parks, determined to make the school visible in the community, part of the civic consciousness. They occupied an abandoned building in the center of town, transforming it from war rubble into a home for the serious and joyful work of inquiry and investigation. Every gesture, every act was in service of the goal of changing history: "The first philosophy learned from these extraordinary events, in the wake of such a war, was to give a human, dignified, civil meaning to existence, to be able to make choices with clarity of mind and purpose, and to yearn for the future of mankind."(5)

What reality does this story weave? What meaning does it offer for the work of early childhood education? *Our work is bigger than standardized curriculum and high stakes testing; it is part of the vital and substantive project "to give a human, dignified, civil meaning to existence."*(6) *To do this work, we must hold a clarity of mind and purpose, we must yearn for the future of humankind, we must commit ourselves to changing history by our daily engagement with young children.*

Two stories, laying out choices to make about the meaning and purpose of early childhood education. Two stories, offering vastly different understandings of who educators are—and who ought to be an educator. Two stories, two ways to weigh the value of children's lives. Two stories, each with a corresponding reality.

Considering these stories side by side reminds us that there are many ways to understand and configure our work, and each of those ways grows from and sustains political, social, and cultural commitments. Education is a political act, and through it, we weave reality.

### **The Convictions at the Heart of this Book**

- In the face of the suffocating press of accountability requirements, we align ourselves with the courageous educators and administrators living from a place of hope rather

than despair. We strive to tell a story about education and its purposes that invigorates our commitments to justice and to joy: a story about listening, about intention, about humility and critical discourse. A story that welcomes a multiplicity of experiences and acknowledges a multiplicity of truths. A story that interrogates assumptions and habits. This story holds a vision of education to which we are eager to be held accountable, as it invites us to reimagine our work.

- We believe that educators—like children—have a vast capacity for deep dives of mind, heart, and spirit. Their thoughts are “ample and greedy”; they seek substantive questions and complexity. Their work is challenging and exhilarating, and demands their full intellectual and emotional attention. Educators deserve—and are sustained by—professional learning that strengthens their development as thinkers, researchers, innovators, and constructors of knowledge. This book grows from our deep regard for educators, and our resolve to stand steady at their side.
- Our thinking about early childhood education is informed by our commitment to challenge racial and economic injustice and the ongoing assault on democratic principles in the United States, and by our grief at the growing evidence for irreversible global warming. Scholar Peter Moss writes that a story about early childhood education “that blithely speaks of investing in the future or preparing children to succeed in the global race without interrogating what that future might be or the sustainability of that global race, that story just will not do.”(7)

Like Moss, we believe that new stories are necessary, stories that “offer hope that another world is possible, a world that is more equal, democratic and sustainable, a world where surprise and wonder, diversity and complexity find their rightful place in early childhood education, indeed all education.” (8) To move towards these new stories, we believe that we must intertwine considerations of culture, racism, white privilege, and power into conversations about pedagogy. We must weave the necessary dispositions and skills for citizenship into our discussions about teaching and learning. We must move beyond efforts towards “greening” our schools, and seek to know our places with a humility that recognizes that we humans are not the center of the story of the Earth. In these ways, we can begin to tell a new story about early childhood education, and in the words of Moss, education’s “potential to amaze and surprise, to invoke wonder and passion, to emancipate and experiment.”(9)

What convictions drive **your** work? What story are you making of your life? For what do you want to be known?

## **How did we come to this book?**

We met nearly thirty years ago, on Ann's first day of work in a child care center in Seattle. She was long on enthusiasm, and astoundingly short on experience. Margie was the visiting staff coach; she threw Ann a lifeline on that first day, gathering the children for a story (a story!) that quieted the chaos. From that first day, we've been writing a story together, bound by our shared political and pedagogical commitments and by deep pleasure in our rigorous collaborations. We've led seminars together; we've made videos together; with our colleague, Deb Curtis, we crafted the Thinking Lens together. But we hadn't written together, not until now. With this book, we offer our current understandings of intellectually rigorous, full-hearted teaching and learning that braids theory and practice.

The book's format draws on the practice, common in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, of active engagement with and response to texts both spoken and written. Ann offers theory, story, and core concepts in her writing, and Margie offers a response that speaks to the ideas that especially stand out to her, and the questions for practice with which she wants us to engage. With this format, we aim to model active reading, as though Margie were making notes in the margin, lacing the pages with sticky notes, and carrying on a lively conversation with Ann. We invite you to join the conversation as you read this book—and to invite your colleagues to read and think with you. Pedagogical practice is not a solitary act, nor should reading and learning be; we urge you to read and think with others.

The essayist and short-story writer Barry Lopez says that "The responsibility of the storyteller is to the culture of the community." (10) We write this book for those who refuse to betray themselves or to betray children by adhering to marketplace outcomes and assessment-driven configurations of teaching and learning. We write this book for those who will not be complicit in the narrowing of education to the too-easy formula that says "quality" is achieved by lists of learning goals or by rating scales. We write this book for those who are ready to reimagine our work, and write a new and renewing story of early childhood education.

***Ann Pelo and Margie Carter. 2018. From Teaching to Thinking: A Pedagogy for Reimagining Our Work.*** Exchange Press