

## Observational account Maya and the Feathers 6/21 by Emily Holzkecht

The families were getting ready to leave school for the day, so we (Maya, Emily, Kirsten and Wendy) were clustered around the exterior door. Maya picked up a feather from the composition shelf, and said that she wanted to take it home. Everyone was standing up. I don't remember any of the adults squatting down to talk to her.

"What are you going to do with the feather at home?" I asked.

"Give it to the birds," answered Maya.

"What do the birds need a feather for?" I asked

"To put in their nests."

"Where do the birds get the feathers that are on their bodies?" I asked

"The humans give them to them."

"Where did you get the hair on your head?" asked Wendy

"I grew it," replied Maya, touching the hair on her head and smiling.

That was the end of the conversation, and Maya left without the feather.

## Reflection on Maya and the Feather considering the language of imagination and the language of metaphor.

No way. The hundred is there.

The child  
is made of one hundred.

The child has  
a hundred languages  
a hundred hands  
a hundred thoughts

**a hundred ways of thinking  
of playing, of speaking.**

A hundred always a hundred  
ways of listening  
of marvelling, of loving

**a hundred joys  
for singing and understanding**

**a hundred worlds  
to discover**

**a hundred worlds  
to invent**

**a hundred worlds  
to dream.**

The child has  
a hundred languages  
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)

**but they steal ninety-nine.**

**The school and the culture**

separate the head from the body.

They tell the child:

to think without hands

to do without head

to listen and not to speak

**to understand without joy**

**to love and to marvel**

**only at Easter and at Christmas.**

They tell the child:

to discover the world already there

and of the hundred

they steal ninety-nine.

**They tell the child:**

that work and play

**reality and fantasy**

**science and imagination**

sky and earth

reason and dream

**are things**

**that do not belong together.**

And thus they tell the child

that the hundred is not there.

The child says:

No way. The hundred is there.

Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini)

...The school and the culture tell children...to understand without joy, to love and to marvel only at Easter and at Christmas...that...reality and fantasy, science and imagination...are things that do not belong together....

In Reggio documentation, children are shown to give amazingly poetic and beautiful explanations of the world. **“The sea is born of the mother wave.”** is one that comes to mind. These words of children are extremely powerful in their ability to move adults, to speak for the rights of children and to command a deeper respect for the ability of our youngest citizens. But words like these along with the incredibly rich conversations between children that occur in the Reggio schools (with little input from the adults) do not arise because Italian children are inherently more poetic and insightful than American children. They also do not arise simply because that’s how children speak. They arise because the Reggio schools have nurtured a culture of learning that is intellectually safe, where education is about developing skills to invent, to create, to communicate, to express and to do all this together with others in a respectful way. They actively work against a culture of learning that is focussed on getting children toward socially accepted preknown “facts” as quickly as possibly regardless if this is through direct teaching or maeutic dialogue with the teacher.

Thinking back on Maya and the Feather, I see a great opportunity for adult reflection and learning as we attempt to create an intellectually safe environment here at Rosalie School.

One way of looking at Maya and the Feather is to see a cute child’s misunderstanding. She thinks birds get feathers from humans.

Another way of looking at Maya and the Feather is to see invention at work. When asked on the spot how birds get the feathers on their bodies, Maya has an immediate answer. Did she invent this possibility on the spot? Or did she already invent the possibility at an earlier time and chose to share it at this moment?

If we think of the young child as weak, we automatically assume that she is literal in what she says and that the literal meaning she shares is full and immediately transparent to adults. However, at Rosalie we are striving towards an image of a strong and capable child who speaks in a hundred languages and has a right to be heard. Because of this image of a child, we must listen deeper. We must not assume that what Maya says is literal or that we understand it as soon as we hear her say the words. One of the languages of children is imagination. Another language of children is metaphor. Children often use imagination and metaphor in their explanations of the world and their construction of knowledge.

### **The sea is born of the mother wave.**

If an adult spoke this about the sea and waves, it is unlikely that we would take him or her literally, that we would assume that what exists here is a misconception that needs to be righted. Why do we do this with children? Why do we presume such power and superiority?

I have to say here that though the questions I asked of Maya were the format of asking for more information so that I can understand her point of view better, I have to admit that my mind did leap to shallow listening and a maeutic path towards pre-known "fact." It is just a coincidence that Wendy was the one that asked the fact-driven question. It could have easily been I who did so. It wasn't until 2 days later that I really realized where I was coming from was at odds with my goal of creating an intellectually safe environment.

When Maya answered that she grew her hair herself, was she smiling because that was a silly question for Wendy to ask (of course she grew her own hair!)? Or was she smiling because she was embarrassed at answering "incorrectly" about the feathers.

I hope the former or something similar was the reason for the smile, and that Maya still holds her position that "humans give birds their feathers." Why?

First, I want Maya to feel safe at school. I want her to feel safe enough to invent, safe enough to use her language of imagination, her language of metaphor. I want all the children to feel very safe in these ways so that they will be able to reach a high level of peer-driven discourse with little intervention on the part of the teacher. I want them to be able to develop skills that are satisfying and rewarding now and throughout school and life.

Secondly, I believe that children are strong and capable of constructing their own knowledge at the best pace for themselves. They do not need us to decide what is a correct "fact" and when is the right time for the children to "know" that "fact". Will Maya's four-year-old life be worse off if she literally believes humans give birds feathers? I don't think so. Will her four-year-old life be worse off if she believes that adults laugh at her inventions, that they do not listen to her seriously? Yes.

Thirdly, “Humans give the birds their feathers” is beautiful. Authors and poets talk of Utopian societies where humans and the natural world are respectfully interconnected. We read their stories and poems, we watch their films and are moved by the love and beauty of this symbiosis. We reflect on the oil spill and other human damages to the natural world and feel a deep sadness. Maya’s proposed relationship between humans and birds is beautiful and significant. Thinking on it now, I wonder what gift the birds have for the humans. Is it their eggs? Is it their song? Their beauty?

Forthly, if we consider the language of metaphor, perhaps her statement is not entirely false. I feed my hens. I give them shelter and water. I care for them when they are sick and clean their coop. Food, water, shelter, health, cleanliness...these are all things that give my birds the ability to grow feathers. If we believe in the image of a strong child, we can believe that it is possible for children to speak in metaphors like this.

These are my reflections to date. My understanding of what happened in the Maya and the Feather conversation is still emerging. My goal is not to blame or shame the adults for not hearing Maya as a strong child, but to recognize, respect and continue our growth as colearners. 6/23/2010