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# Preschool as a Shared Place. About the Fundamental Values of the University Preschool in Gdansk

**Abstract**

The article consists of two parts. In the first part, we introduce the premises of the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia, which formed the basis for the concept of the University Preschool in Gdansk. We refer to the values that, from the perspective of adults who are part of the preschool community, were the foundation for creating everyday educational context in the University Preschool during the first three years of its functioning. In the discourse of Reggio Emilia, a preschool is not perceived so much as a place of instruction or formation, but rather as a place of education, a place where values are transmitted, discussed and constructed. Democracy, participation and subjectivity are key categories on which the narrative is focused. In the second part, these categories are the starting point for reconstructing the cultural practices present in the everyday life of the preschool which fulfill the above mentioned values. We refer to the goals of the University Preschool, the principles and conditions of its functioning. We also describe solutions, especially in the field of the organization of the educational environment, which contribute to the building of a community in which children are listened to and supported by adults.

**Keywords:** The Reggio Emilia Approach, University Preschool in Gdansk, participation, subjectivity, organization of the environment.

(*) The authors received the consent of the Rector of the University of Gdansk, prof. dr. hab. Piotr Stepnowski, to publish and provide the name of the University Preschool in Gdansk.

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Received: 2.04.2023; accepted: 25.08.2023.



https://doi.org/10.18778/2450-4491.17.12

## Przedszkole jako miejsce wspólne. O fundamentalnych wartościach Przedszkola Uniwersyteckiego w Gdańsku

**Abstrakt**

Artykuł zasadniczo składa się z dwóch części. W pierwszej przybliżamy założenia filozofii edukacyjnej Reggio Emilia, na której opierała się koncepcja funkcjonowania Przedszkola Uniwersyteckiego w Gdańsku, oraz odwołujemy się do wartości, które z perspektywy dorosłych, będących częścią społeczności przedszkola, były fundamentem dla tworzenia codzienności edukacyjnej w Przedszkolu UG w pierwszych trzech latach jego działalności. W dyskursie Reggio Emilia przedszkole postrzegane jest bowiem nie tyle jako miejsce instrukcji czy formowania, ale jako miejsce edukacji, miejsce, w którym wartości są przekazywane, dyskutowane i konstruowane. Demokracja, partycypacja oraz podmiotowość to kluczowe kategorie, wokół których skoncentrowana jest narracja. W drugiej części tekstu stanowią one punkt wyjścia dla zrekonstruowania tych praktyk kulturowych obecnych w codzienności edukacyjnej przedszkola, które powyższe wartości urzeczywistniały. Odwołujemy się do założeń przedszkola, zasad i warunków jego funkcjonowania, oraz przedstawiamy rozwiązania, w szczególności w zakresie organizacji przestrzeni edukacyjnej, służące budowaniu wspólnoty, w której dorośli słuchali dzieci i towarzyszyli im w ich rozwoju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** podejście Reggio Emilia, Przedszkole Uniwersyteckie w Gdańsku, przedszkole jako miejsce wspólne, partycypacja, podmiotowość, organizacja przestrzeni.

## Axiological basis of the Reggio Emilia approach

A preschool perceived as a shared place is one of the crucial attributes of the Reggio Emilia approach – a philosophy of education born right after the end of the Second World War in Villa Cella, a small Italian village next to Regio Emilia.[1] The involvement of the local community, cooperation, co-responsibility, and collective action were a solid fundament on which an institution was established there, becoming an impulse for the development of the Reggio Emilia educational project. There is an inscription on the board of the preschool which still exists today: "Women and men. Together we built this school,[2] because we wanted a new different place for our children."[3] Loris Malaguzzi (2016c), the intellectual leader of the Reggio Emilia educational project, recalled this experience:

> […] something unexpected and incredible happened. In the chaos of those first days of freedom news arrived that in Villa Cella women and men, farmers and factor workers, doing everything on their own, had decided to build

[1] Currently, Villa Cella is a territory (so-called frazione) on the outskirts of the municipality of Reggio Emilia.
[2] Highlights made by the authors of the article.
[3] See: the digital archive of the museum available online (*Livello 9 – Museo di Luoghi a Reggio Emilia*).

> a school for their children. German soldiers fleeting towards the [river] Po had left a tank, some trucks, some horses. It was loot for the people. From their sale money arrived, money to spend immediately. That was how the idea was born.
>
> […] The miracle happened. There was a collection, and more money arrived. Every Saturday and every Sunday there was an incredible throng of women, men and children putting up the walls. In eight months the roof was ready. In nine months the school, like a baby, came into the world. In 1947, after official authorization it started to function (Malaguzzi 2016c: 23–24).

In the 1950s, concurrent with the transformation of the socio-demographical situation,[4] a result of the region's intensive economic development, there was a need to create high-level educational institutions for young children on a broader scale. In the absence of decisive action on part of the city, the initiative to run early education institutions was undertaken by various civic organizations, mainly women's, including the Italian Women's Union UDI (Unione Donne Italiane). Until the late 1950s, UDI operated eight such places for children aged 3–6. At the same time, women's movements demanded to put an end to the domination of the Catholic Church as the institution providing most of the institutional support for young children in the city. They consistently and determinedly sought to create public, secular preschools available to all residents of Reggio Emilia. It became possible in the beginning of the 1960s, after the election of the new city mayor – Renzo Bonazzi, and after changes on the domestic political scene and the takeover of power by the center-left government. The first city preschool "Robinson Crusoe" was established in November 1963, and the next in 1964 ("Anna Frank" preschool) and 1968 ("Primavera"). Despite political turbulations and difficulties, the preschools established after the war and run by parents, including the one in Villa Cella, came under the jurisdiction of the city.[5] Malaguzzi then began to cooperate with the local government, initiating an intensive social dialogue with the aim to create a coherent pedagogical concept of early childhood institutions in Reggio Emilia. Despite the fact that Malaguzzi is undoubtedly the face of the Reggio Emilia approach, the development of the educational project would not be possible without cooperation and community action. This aspect was pointed out by Tullio de Mauro (2006) who, while recognizing the influence of Malaguzzi, wrote that:

> […] the municipal preschools of Reggio would not have been possible without his inspiration, but his inspiration would not have had concreteness and endurance or such a far-reaching impact, increasingly throughout the world, without the commitment of an entire community and its administrators (de Mauro 2006: 14).

[4] The transformations referred mostly to the status of a family, including the role of women.

[5] The preschool in Villa Cella came under the jurisdiction of the city in 1967. It was then named "XXV Aprile" ("XXV of April") to commemorate the anniversary of Italy's liberation from fascist rule (see: Baldini 2012: 83).

Since the beginning of their functioning, the Reggio preschools were based on participatory and collective wisdom. In reference to the functioning of early childhood institutions, Bruno Ciari, a pedagogue working with Malaguzzi, outlined the aim of changes in education taking place in Reggio Emilia in the 1960s and 70s. The aim was to:

> Break down the barrier between school and society, make schools centers of associative life which involve in their processes of culture and education all the indirect workers who collaborate, govern, experiment and run the school community (citizens, local authorities, unions etc.) together with the direct workers, teachers and students, psychologists and social workers (Rolando et al. 2012: 92).

The preschools were therefore perceived as shared places that belong to the community and are governed by it.

The category of a "shared place" is especially important in Malaguzzi's philosophy of education. Malaguzzi (2016d) indeed did not perceive a preschool (*scuola dell infanzia*) as an isolated institution, but "as a specific, institutional situation of socialization and of educational, cultural, political processes of responsibility for children" (Malaguzzi 2016d: 227), he saw the school as an institution, "which cannot avoid offering to participate in building an educating society in which contents and purposes can be debated and integrated dialectically" (Malaguzzi 2016d: 227). Preschools are therefore treated as dialectical places – "we create their meanings and they create us" (see Mendel 2006: 32). Malaguzzi's vision corresponds to Maria Mendel's understanding of a place as always significant and needs to be understood as "a result of shared determining and upholding meanings. It is a social and individual knowledge, which is achieved through conferring specific senses and meanings through negotiation. As a result, knowledge is not a static description of reality, but it co-creates it" (Mendel 2006: 29). A preschools is therefore not only an institution and a building, but also a community centered around commonly shared meanings and values. From this perspective, educational institutions – including preschools – cannot be perceived as axiologically neutral. They are carriers of values, which is notably emphasized by Carlina Rinaldi (2008), an Italian pedagogue from Reggio Emilia:

> […] school, including the school for young children, is an educational place, a place of education; a place where we educate and are educated; a place where values and knowledge are transmitted; and above all a place where values and knowledge are constructed. School is a place of culture – that is, a place where a personal and collective culture is developed that influences the social, political, and values context and, in turn, is influenced by this context in a relationship of deep and authentic reciprocity.
>
> We see school not as the place of instruction or the place of formation (in the vocational/professional sense), but as the place of education. But what do we mean by this? That school, for us, is a place where, first and foremost, values are transmitted, discussed, and constructed. The term education is

> therefore closely correlated with the concept of values, where "to educate" also means – and in certain respects primarily means – to educate the intrinsic values of each individual and each culture, in order to make these values extrinsic, visible, conscious, and shareable (Rinaldi 2008: 38 – highlights in original).

Among the values which have shaped the experience of Reggio Emilia, we can find the following: subjectivity and the value of difference correlated with it, referring to an individual's uniqueness and exceptionality, the value of participation and democracy, the value of learning and the value of play, fun, positive feelings and emotions. The University Preschool in Gdansk is also built on these foundations. Although the preschool was established in a completely different socio-historical context, a clear aim of the project was the communal and democratic character of the institution, creating a space responsible for the optimal process of child education, in cooperation with all subjects of the relationship and following the path of constant development. Malaguzzi (2016b), referring to the experience of Regio Emilia, characterized it as participatory education, "in the sense that it recognizes and enacts the needs and rights of children, families, teachers and school workers, actively to feel part of a solidarity of practice and ideas" (Malaguzzi 2016b: 353). This assumption is also reflected in the philosophy practiced by the University Preschool, which can undoubtedly be considered a "shared place," which will be further argued on the following pages.

## The pedagogical concept of the University Preschool in Gdansk

The University Preschool was established in 2019 in Gdansk, on the first floor of a students' house located on the campus of the University of Gdansk, in response to the needs of the academic community. Pursuant to the decision of the Rector of the University of Gdansk (UG), the preschool started operating on September 1, 2019 and until August 31, 2022 it was a unit in the organizational structure of the University of Gdansk.[6] The institution was designed to accommodate 27 children aged 3–6, who were only formally divided into two groups (one of 19, and one of 9 children). A headmistress was employed, who was a research and teaching employee at the Institute of Pedagogy of the University of Gdansk, as well as four teachers and a teacher's assistant (in the third year of its functioning, the preschool additionally

[6] On September 1, 2022, the authority running the facility changed. Currently, it is run by Pozytywne Inicjatywy Edukacja sp. z o.o. with its registered office in Puck, and the full name of the institution is University Public Preschool in Gdansk. In the article we are referring only to the period in which the University Preschool in Gdansk was run by the University of Gdansk. Although the facility run by the company is functioning in the same space as the one characterized in the article, formally, however, it is a separate educational institution (see *Rejestr Szkół i Placówek Oświatowych*). We do not possess knowledge in what form and to what degree the University Public Preschool is following the Reggio Emilia concept; in its statutes there is also no reference to the philosophy of Reggio Emilia (see: *Statut Przedszkola Uniwersyteckiego* 2019; *Statut Publicznego Przedszkola Uniwersyteckiego w Gdańsku* 2023). Considering all the above, the article was written in past tense.

hired a second teacher's assistant on a 1/2-time basis). The preschool also employed an additional office worker, who – despite formally serving only a typically administrative position – was an important and present adult in the day-to-day functioning of the children from the UG preschool.[7] Since the beginning, the University Preschool was seen as an important place for the entire community: the children and adults – the teachers and parents.

The *Statute of the University Preschool* in the period when it functioned within the structure of the University of Gdansk contained provisions indicating the specificity of the institution's pedagogical assumptions:

> §16.2. Elements of the pedagogical concept of Reggio Emilia are implemented in the Preschool in several aspects:
>
> 1. Personal (the role and cooperation of teachers, parents and local community; the importance of the academic community);
>
> 2. Material (carefully designed educational space: arrangement and equipment of preschool rooms, planning educational activities in the natural environment);
>
> 3. Strategic (principles of child activity in preschools, principles of children's functioning in the social and natural environment) (*University Preschool Statute* 2019: 8).

The unique academic character of the University Preschool seemed to be consistent with Malaguzzi's vision. The following "fragment" of the *Statute* is an open declaration of the subjectivity of each person, guaranteeing the right to participate in the creation of the preschool:

> §18.1. The Preschool is a place – a Laboratory, where children become researchers, are active in the educational space, co-created by children and their families, teachers, lecturers, students and doctoral students, students of the University of the Third Age, representatives of the local community and other entities operating in the vicinity of the Preschool.

Although the fundamental aspects of the institution were clearly expressed in the *Statute*, the entire period of its functioning was a time devoted to forming its special identity and building a community. As Jolanta Zwiernik (2015) rightly notes:

> in order for a fragment of space to become a place, time is required. It is essential for the impersonal system of material and immaterial attrib-

[7] In the period described in the article the headmistress of the preschool was Katarzyna Kmita-Zaniewska; assisted in administrative work by Joanna Gutowska. The preschool was also co-created by:
– in the 2019/2020 school year – teachers: Magdalena Bartosiewicz, Agata Chruszcz, Paulina Matera, Małgorzata Michalak; teacher's assistant: Katarzyna Tysler;
– in the 2020/2021 school year – teachers: Magdalena Bartosiewicz, Paulina Matera, Małgorzata Michalak, Joanna Obniska/Marta Okułowicz; teacher's assistant: Katarzyna Tysler;
– in the 2021/2022 school year – teachers: Paulina Matera/Zuzanna Olszewska, Małgorzata Michalak, Karolina Naczk, Marta Okułowicz; teacher's assistants: Ewelina Kołtacka, Aleksandra Koczara.

> utes situated (or being situated) on a specific territory to transform into a known, close, domesticated, intimate. It can be stated that the domestication of space has a processual character and is connected with forming a relationship with this fragment of space, which becomes a person's place, as it enters into the private sphere. It is a person, individually or as part of a community, who marks, signifies, domesticates a fragment of space, affording it with values. There is no place without someone who considers it as such (Zwiernik 2015: 22).

Building a community of children, teachers, parents was one of the priorities of the headmistress who created the framework for the pedagogical concept of the preschool. It was especially important to create such conditions as to allow every subject to consider the preschool as "their place." The organizational culture and social space, as well as architectural space, were focused on shaping a home-preschool relationship. We would like to especially highlight the physical space, the arrangement of the interior, which as Aleksander Nalaskowski points out, communicates; it invites to or discourages from entering and remaining in it. According to him, "the architecture of a school building expresses its own language which can be translated into quite accurate types of opinions about education" (Nalaskowski 2002: 35). Malaguzzi (2016d) also emphasizes the importance of physical space in building relations between subjects:

> Schools are ensembles of presence and interventions: of children, teachers (female and male), auxiliaries, parents, citizens' cultural, political and trade union organizations. Therefore school spaces must not only include but actually support the presence of this complexity of different groups, and stimulate them into conscious participation in children's issues, into the general issues of childhood, of school and of education (Malaguzzi 2016c: 228).

Conducting a critical analysis of the social space of the University Preschool, we refer to the advice on the spatial organization of a preschool outlined by Malaguzzi in 1975 which, in our opinion, is still relevant to this day.[8] On their basis we have distinguished several features of a given space which endow the preschool with participatory character, allowing each participant of the educational process to feel as though they are "at home." The elements listed below to a large extent also characterized the University Preschool, thus transforming it into a shared place for teachers, children, and their families likewise.[9]

[8] The advice was prepared on the basis of: Malaguzzi (2016d).

[9] When referring to the experience of Reggio Emilia, in the article we have used visual narration in addition to verbal. In order to publish the visual material, the required consents for the use of the image of children and adults were obtained.

# The participatory character of the space of the University Preschool in Gdansk

## Organization of space – architectural layout

A logically organized space with transparent areas, a network of tunnels and passages; on the one hand, with sectioned off and clear interiors, on the other, forming a cohesive whole; a friendly space, allowing for modification and offering effortless and effective movement should characterize early education institutions, according to Malaguzzi (2016c). Therefore, by adapting a part of the student dormitory for the purpose of establishing a preschool, the University of Gdansk had employed an interior designer who familiarized herself with the pedagogical conception of the institution and searched for solutions which would assist in realizing the ideas of Reggio Emilia in the available space. The architectural layout of rooms – including bearing walls – limited the possibility of creating an open plan for the preschool, however, all necessary steps were taken in order to make the space more friendly and accessible.

Photos 1 & 2. The corridor of the preschool



Source: Katarzyna Kmita-Zaniewska's (K.K.Z.) archive

Photo 3. Room 1 with a platform



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Wooden elements and cork boards hung on walls were introduced in the narrow corridor. A large stage was added in one of the classrooms, serving the function of a platform, seating area and space used by children during play. There was a connector in this room, i.e. a wide sliding door.

In two of the rooms small libraries were created, which became a soundproof space for resting on poufs, as well as a reading corner, a base and a hiding place for children. Mirrors were installed in each room. Fabrics were hung from the ceil-

ing. Potted plants introduced a cozy, homely atmosphere to the interior. A room with kitchen facilities and a coffee maker was available to the staff as well as parents and guests. A centrally located main entrance to the preschool and a couch placed in the main hall allowed visitors to orient themselves in the organization of space right on the threshold. The layout of the building and the "communication route" through the corridor gave it the function of a shared space, encouraging interaction and communication between members of the preschool community.

Malaguzzi (2016c) postulated the necessity to create both a coherent exterior and interior space, allowing for free movement between them. Unfortunately, due to the building's localization, it was not possible to create a preschool garden which would be integrated with the interior. A playground was created, approx. 100 meters from the main building, but for safety reasons children were not allowed to freely move between the two sections. However, it not only inspired them to enjoy uninhibited fun activities, but also encouraged them to undertake various research activities.

Photos 4, 5, 6 and 7. A playground with a mini garden and a mud kitchen made by parents



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

## Space that inspires children's research activity

According to Malaguzzi's (2016c) vision, the preschool space should provide children not only a comfortable and safe stay for several hours a day, but also an environment (surroundings) that inspire them to undertake various types of research activities, a space rich with different types of materials; inviting them to explore and pursue various projects. Following these rules, the rooms of the preschool were arranged in such a way as to enable children free exploration and independent access to prepared materials, as well as the possibility to re-organize the space according to specific aims and needs of children participating either in individual or group work.

Photos 8 & 9. Smaller room (2) for the "older kids' club"



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photo 10. Room 1 with a platform: small library



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photos 11, 12 & 13. Children participating in activities in room 1



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Next to the stage in room 1 there was a *piazza* – a space for the entire community to gather in a circle in the morning or to conduct other meetings, consultations and guest events. Children would use this space to participate in movement and construction games on the floor and platform. The presence of a large multimedia board with a projector and permanent access of children to an overhead projector (OHP) transformed the platform-stage into a place of creative play with light (light atelier).

Photos 14 & 15. Children participating in activities in room 1



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photos 16 & 17. Children using the overhead projector



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

There was a theatrical corner located next to the stage, consisting of a wardrobe built with the parents' assistance. During Saturday meetings a wooden construction was raised which replaced coat hangers and a chest with clothes, inviting children to "dress up" and try out acting in different roles.

Photo 18. Theatrical corner



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photo 19. Parents creating the wardrobe



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Each room was equipped with wooden racks and shelfs storing various types of materials and work aid, dominated by loose parts – elements that could be used for different reasons, utilizing different textures and materials (cardboard and paper, plastic, wood, artificial materials, glass and pottery). Proper organization and storage of loose parts in the classrooms gave the opportunity to discover the eclectic and creative use of "waste" and leftovers by children and teachers. The loose parts were stored in one of the rooms – a loose parts storage space, which is the preschool "Remida."[10] Since the beginning of the preschool's functioning, parents were invited to bring different materials that could be used by both children and staff in various projects and creative activities.

Photos 20 & 21. Loose parts storage space



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Mathematical corners were arranged in two classrooms, encouraging children to measure and count, as well as a significant research area consisting mostly of natural materials (minerals, feathers, sea shells and seasonal offerings from nature, such as fruits, cones, leaves and flowers), books and nature atlases, magnifying glasses and microscopes. There were also tables in the classrooms, on which children could find invitations and so-called "provocations," i.e. "educational offers" created by teachers (or other members of the staff) – arrangements that support the learning process and develop children's curiosity.

An important space that inspired children's projects was also the music room. It was used for gym classes as well as being an additional space for activities in smaller groups. It also housed smaller instruments (kept in a large wardrobe) and a piano. One of the walls was covered with a mirror, the other – with wall bars and a climbing wall that could be easily hidden behind a curtain.

[10] Remida is a network of post-production waste storage and distribution sites operating in Reggio Emilia, which was given a second life by educators and artists (see: www.remida.org).

Photo 22. Invitations to art exercises in the music room



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photo 23. Musical improvisation with percussive instruments



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photos 24 & 25. Children's activity in the music room



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

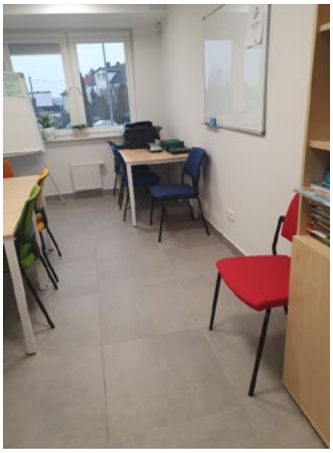
At first, the classroom also functioned as an atelier, however, in the second year of the preschool's functioning, a separate space was created – with the parents' assistance – in another room designed for artistic activities. Both the staff and parents valued the art activity of children and together they created an atelier in one of the office rooms previously used primarily for conversations and meetings between the staff and parents, but at the same time also functioned as an IT center available to children (a computer, a multifunctional device with a copier and printer, and a laminator). The equipment remained in the room – it was available to adults and children next to the entrance to the atelier.

The functioning of the atelier as a space that breaks down the domination of verbal language and puts emphasis on activities utilizing various representations (Malaguzzi 2016c) is characteristic for preschools and infant toddler centres in Reggio Emilia. The atelier located in the University Preschool was an independent

room, in which groups of children could work while sitting around a large table with the atelierista.[11] One of the teachers played this role, and was involved in preparing the space and equipping the work station with the necessary materials. Other members of the staff also used the atelier as a space which allows children to adopt specific attitudes – concentration, silence, reflection on their own actions. The arrangement of the room put cooperation and communication in the first place.

Working with clay played an important role in the preschool. Broad use of this material quickly replaced plasticine and other plastic masses commonly used by children. The children would often freely use the atelier in the morning hours, when they were encouraged by teachers to engage in creative activities using different materials, for example paper and scraps of fabric, they would create installations out of wooden elements (e.g. bricks, buttons, peg dolls), or focus on drawing, painting, and cutting out. If a smaller group would form just before the preschool closing hours, the children often chose to work in the atelier, asking the arriving parents to join them.

Photos 26 & 27. The atelier before it was created





Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photo 28. The preschool atelier



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

[11] An atelierista – a term specific for the preschool described in the article; it refers to a host of the atelier, who has artistic education.

Since the University Preschool was an integral part of the academic community, not only the building and neighboring garden, but the entire university campus functioned as a space for children's explorations. Furthermore, the space for children's everyday experiences was not limited only to the building and its surroundings. Once a week children would embark on a field trip. They built a base in a forest close to the preschool, which they would visit regularly. They also explored other uncharted green areas. Although in the physical sense these places did not form a coherent whole with the preschool building, in the pedagogical sense we could observe a continuity of children's activity. The observations made by the children and the experiences gained during the expeditions became the starting point for various projects that the children worked on after returning to the facility.

Photos 29, 30, 31 & 32. Children during forest trips



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

## Space that respects children's rights

According to Malaguzzi (2016c), an especially important attribute of educational space is the possibility to accommodate children's fundamental rights which are, in his view, sadly too often marginalized or ignored. These are, among others, the following:

- the right to a mess, which frees children's potential, reduces inhibitions, liberates children's actions;
- the right to noisiness and silence, the right to be with others, the right to be alone, according to physiological and psychological needs;

– the right to eat and the right to sleep, which are two fundamentally important rights, having psychological, affective, emotional and intellectual implications (Malaguzzi 2016c).

In the University Preschool, the awareness about the educational cooperation between adults and children was rooted in dialogue and acceptance of the children's need to freely create and play. Recognition by adults of the right of children to suspend work and leave behind a project which could be perceived as "a mess" (e.g. an unfinished construction, materials prepared for later work, left in an "inappropriate" place), was revealed in the mindfulness and in the conversation held in order to discover the sense of children's decisions and to respect a child's autonomy. The value of the child's labor was also recognized by the cleaning staff, who would carefully clean out the classroom after the end of the day, trying not to disrupt the projects which were still being completed. A potential mess or difficulty in cleaning up the space was never a factor determining the decision to undertake a given task. Children could realize their ideas without any limitations imposed on them, while at the same time they were always aware of the consequences and their own responsibility for tidying up the space after work.

Photos 33 & 34. Children's activity in room 2 and in the music room



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

In the University Preschool children could work without any coercion both individually as well as in pairs or small groups, depending on their needs and on the given project. The possibility for children to freely communicate was a very important aspect of the preschool's functioning. Meetings organized in a circle were a crucial element of everyday routine, offering a chance to practice dialogue based on mutual respect. During those meetings, children would share their experiences and observations, and decide, together with the adults, about their current projects. Meetings in the circle were a perfect opportunity to experience how democratic mechanisms work. Children's decision-making was also fostered by the flexible approach to curriculum, which was characteristic of the preschool staff. Educational possibilities initiated by the teachers were treated as an invitation to pursue a given research activity, and not as dispositions to work. The adults were therefore ready to accept

a child's refusal to get involved in a task that was offered to them. Children also had the possibility to initiate their own projects. This was also facilitated by the flexible nature of the space, whose function changed along with the children's ideas for its development. Such an example could be the reader's corner. At times it offered respite, allowing for a moment to chill down, other times it became a hiding place or a base.

Photos 35, 36 & 37. Children's activity in the reader's corner in rooms 1 and 2



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Organizing the day's schedule in a mixed aged group is no easy task due to the great diversity of children's physiological needs. It is especially true when it comes to their need to sleep during the day which, although it is definitely the strongest among the youngest children, is a very individual issue. Forcing all children to sleep or denying quality rest to those children who require it are reprehensible practices and can in no way be justified by organizational difficulties. Adults in the University Preschool stood out due to their particular sensitivity and attentiveness to children's needs. Due to the fact that the preschool had resigned from a strict division of units that would be assigned to a particular classroom, it was possible to organize different forms of activity taking place at the same time. There were always two teachers and a teacher's assistant present with each group. Furthermore, both the headmistress and the office worker were attentive to the children present in the building. If there was a necessity, they could help the children in their day-to-day activities. Such conditions made it possible to organize the day's schedule in such a way so that children requiring sleep could rest in one classroom while the others worked on their individual projects under the guidance of the second teacher.

Children's subjectivity was also respected during meals. Children in the University Preschool were treated as competent and capable of making autonomous decisions in terms of food. They chose products themselves, deciding on what they will eat and how much. Furthermore, once a month, on the occasion of celebrating the birthdays of all children who were born that month, children would prepare a meal

with the help of the teacher based on to their own recipe. It was a perfect opportunity to shape proper eating habits.

Photo 38. Children during a meal



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photo 39. Children preparing a fruit salad



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

The belief that children can evaluate their own needs also manifested itself in the absence of compulsion to use the toilet "on command," for instance before going out to the garden or on a trip. Yes, children were encouraged to use the toilet in such situations, but the teachers still respected the child's right to make the final decision independently.

Photos 40 & 41. A child pouring soup by herself



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

## Space that encourages cooperation, assists in communication

The equal status of specific spaces, emphasizing their importance due to their function is another important feature of educational space in Reggio Emilia preschools. Non-pedagogical spaces such as the kitchen or storage and office spaces, which are often closed and unavailable, are an integral part of space. Additionally, this approach also meant including adults in non-teaching positions in the everyday life of the preschool (Malaguzzi 2016c). In most preschools the split between the pedagogical staff and the assisting personnel is often very apparent. The formal division into didactic and nondidactic employees creates sharp borders between the roles and competences of specific employees. In practice, it often entails the marginalization of the role of those in nondidactic positions. However, every adult who can be encountered in the preschool was significant from the child's perspective. Because of that all of the employees of the University Preschool were part of one team in which they collectively, as partners, worked on creating the best conditions for the children's development. Children were accompanied not only by their teachers, but also by the teacher's assistants and office workers. Each adult brought in their own experience and perspective, different from the teacher's. For example, one of the assistants, a biologist, became a natural guide around the natural world. Since children were not isolated from the rooms which did not have any "educational character," and their presence there was accepted, they had the opportunity to observe how other adults work, interact with them and build relations.

Photos 42 & 43. Teacher's assistant (KT) as an educator on nature



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

The possibility to meet and talk, work together when dealing with everyday activities and situations, according to the needs of children and adults (Malaguzzi 2016c), is a necessary condition for the functioning of Reggio preschools. Indeed, when entering the building of the University Preschool, the first thing one could see in the foreground was an enormous couch. On the other side of the couch, there was a showcase housing the pedagogical library and prepared "provocations."

Photo 44. Children looking at photos from a "birthday calendar" with the teacher's assistance



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive

Photo 45. Children and adults using the office space



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive

Photo 46. The teacher's assistant (EK) shares her passion for theater



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive

Photos 47 & 48. Showcase in the corridor




Source: K.K.Z.'s archive

The unique arrangement of the objects and books on the shelves often caught the attention of children while they were waiting to leave the preschool with a group of their peers or parents. The couch triggered a symbolic feeling of homeliness. It attracted like a magnet, any time parents or members of the staff needed a place to sit down and talk. The couch was a waiting room – a stop before one embarks on a journey. It was also a space offering relief to children's longing during the process of adaptation to the preschool. Parents would spend time there, while their children were slowly getting ready to stay in the classroom with the others.

Photos 49 & 50. The couch as an important place for children and adults



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive

The social room, together with a small kitchenette, was a very important place in the preschool space, offering comfortable conditions for adults working in the preschool to meet. Discussion, joint analysis and interpretation of materials collected during the day: notes from observations, photographs or films, is one of the fundaments of Reggio Emilia approach.

Malaguzzi (2016c) wrote about the ability of space to uphold communication, dialogue between a preschool and the parents and local community, highlighting that space should inform about what is happening in the facility, what the children and adults are working on, what they think, what is important for them. The organizational culture of the University Preschool, by positioning the parent as a partner for the teacher, manifested itself e.g. in the style of communicating with parents and the headmistress's actions, leading to transparency and openness. Daily meetings and conversations with parents, held in the preschool, were complemented by correspondence using several communication channels:

- by telephone or text message (the staff contacted parents individually or collectively, by sending text messages);
- posts in a private group on a social media platform (parents and staff);
- email correspondence (communication between the headmistress and parents regarding day-to-day issues, topics important for the preschool's community, upcoming events, expected guests, acknowledgements etc.);
- announcements posted on a board in the corridor (e.g. upcoming events, menu).

A separate task for the staff, resulting from the adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach, was documenting the experiences of children and adults. Each day the parents would receive an electronic photograph showing their children's enjoyment, or the learning process and realization of a project. Some of the photographs, selected each day for printing, were used to create "The Preschool Daily," i.e. a gallery of photos displayed in the preschool's corridor. The printed photographs depicted the children's experiences from the last five days, with newer photos replacing older ones. Parents and children looked at the photographs together and talked about them in the corridor. They became a pretext to talk about the children's everyday experiences.

The photographs collected in the "Daily" gallery were of interest also to the children who, while freely moving between e.g. the locker room to the classrooms or toilet, would stop and look at the photos. The gallery, then, would offer an opportunity for education – it was a carrier of experiences, it enlivened children's conversations and triggered emotions.

Photo 51. Board with the "Daily" gallery




Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photo 52. Inspired by the "Daily" gallery, a mother talks with children



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Photos 53 & 54. Children's activity inspired by the "Daily" gallery



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

Cooperation with parents, based on dialogue and mutual trust, was one of the main fundaments of the University Preschool. The parents formed a harmonious community, there was no need to create a more formalized body to assist in the functioning of the facility. There was no Parent Council in the preschool. Regardless, the parents, sharing a common cause, participated in afternoon meetings with the staff several times a year, during which they actively discussed important issues, searched for new solutions, but also evaluated the way the preschool was run. The first meeting in September between the staff and the parents opened up with a "greeting circle," during which everybody sitting next to each other on the floor of the classroom would greet each other while new parents introduced themselves.

Photo 55. Meeting with parents and evaluation of the preschool's functioning conducted in groups with the use of the Metaplan technique



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

The calendar listing important events in the life of the preschool also included regular meeting of the entire community. The participatory approach fundamental for the Reggio Emilia preschools was evident in the University Preschool through a cycle of organized meetings and family workshops – most often taking place outside (in winter – holiday meetings, and in spring – field games), birthday picnics, outdoor meetings on the occasion of the annual children's day (June 1), and forest picnics at the end of the school year. Parents were anxious to meet, they came in large numbers, prepared snacks, cleaned up after the events. Preschool graduates with their parents and siblings also joined. These events grouping together the entire community, illustrated on the photographs below, are the substance of the participatory character of the preschool. They offered opportunity to build relations and mutual trust, to deepen the sense of belonging to a community.

Photos 56, 57, 58 & 59. Outdoor meetings of the preschool community (2020–2022)



Source: K.K.Z.'s archive.

## Conclusion

The solutions characterized above and employed in the University Preschool in Gdansk referred to the main pillars of the Reggio Emilia approach and the philosophy of Loris Malaguzzi. They embodied the value of subjectivity and participation, giving meaning to the participation in the everyday life of each person connected to the functioning of the preschool. Children were offered the opportunity to grow up and learn while being in a space created with respect not only for their needs, but also the needs of their parents. Although the child was the central subject of all activities undertaken in the preschool, without good relations, cooperation and collective wisdom of the adults – teachers, assistants and parents – it would not be possible to create a supportive educational space that respects the rights of children. Only in a place imbued with a spirit of participation can children experience true freedom and independence, learn about democratic mechanisms, and discover how they can build relationships based on mutual listening. As Malaguzzi (2016a: 180) emphasized:

> They take in the first models for l i v i n g  t o g e t h e r from how adults, teachers, assistants, parents, neighbourhood men and women work 'together'; they sense how their issues and those of their families and environment become issues for adult attention and care; they feel a stimulating solidarity alive around them.

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## To cite this article

Kmita-Zaniewska K., Maj A. (2023) *Preschool as a Shared Place. About the Fundamental Values of the University Preschool in Gdansk*, "Nauki o Wychowaniu. Studia Interdyscyplinarne", no. 2(17), pp. 158–185.

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