In 2008, I was fortunate to travel to Reggio Emilia on a scholarship to study at the students and professors workshops. This opportunity transformed the many articles, journals and books I had read about this place into a real life experience. Professor Carlina Rinaldi spoke about the meaning of pedagogy. Listening to her talk brought about a spiritual revelation as I remembered the child within and what it felt like to explore the world.

Children are capable of leading the way, in making decisions and expressing ideas through a range of resources. To be creative one needs to be inspired. Most of our inspiration comes from nature. How then can we allow children the freedom to explore their natural surrounds when they are penned in an artificial environment? The outdoors, in the name of safety, has become anything but the outdoors. Trees have been replaced by metal structures for climbing, bubbling brooks and fountains have been replaced by safe water play, the texture, smell and colour of grass has been replaced by artificial turf and the many sounds of nature have been drowned out by recorded music.

Opportunity not risk
If we want children to learn to use their minds, then we need to allow them the freedom to exercise creativity. This process involves problem solving and applying new ideas in order to achieve a desired effect or product. Providing the answers teaches nothing — arriving at an answer independently teaches us everything. Problem solving is the pinnacle of learning, and what we use to solve problems both independently and in collaboration with others is the very source that drives us to reaching higher levels of thinking. In order to solve problems we need to allow children to take risks. Risk taking provides disappointment and rewards — both natural parts of life. Taking responsibility for mistakes and correcting them by applying alternative ways is how we steer ourselves back on course.

In Australia, we seem to be obsessed with "preventing possible problems". What we deem a ‘risk’ is often seen as an ‘opportunity’ in Reggio Emilia.

My memory as a child growing up in Eastwood, Sydney, during the 1970s conjures up happy images of childhood play, where we would be outdoors until the street lights came on — an indication that we had to be home for dinner. My childhood was spent riding bikes, running errands to the corner shop and my favourite adventure: climbing up the backyard Jacaranda tree at home and sitting on a branch, feeling the summer breeze and smelling the sweet fragrance of the lovely purple flowers and Jasmine running along the back paling fence.

Missing out on nature
The endless possibilities for play and the natural resources surrounding my home inspired me and are the root of my creative impulses today. If children miss out on this part of childhood, where are they to draw their inspiration from?
A planned environment offers limitations and a means to an end for play opportunities. We are so used to having to be prepared that we forget the joy of discovery. Professor Rinaldi (1988) likens the process to a journey where one finds the way using a compass rather than taking a train with its fixed routes and schedules. The goal is for children to make choices, communicate ideas and receive feedback. Our duty as teachers is to listen to children. This means giving value to others, being open to what they have to say and offer. Sergio Spaggiari, Director of Early Childhood Education in Reggio Emilia, suggests that it isn’t an accident that we have two eyes, two ears but only one mouth (Milikan 2001)!

Professor Rinaldi expressed her view of the young child as the first great researcher. She explained that all children are born searching for and therefore researching the meaning of life — the meaning of self relation to others and the world. Researching the environment and our effect on our surrounds involves words such as curiosity, unknown, wonder, doubt, marvel, amazement, trial and error words that place important values on which to construct our analogy and our approach to teaching. Professor Rinaldi implores us as teachers not to lose the ‘why’ in children’s education and to use it in order to rediscover life, to teach and guide children and to be beside them as they find their path in life.

Where we live is where our children connect with culture. Discovering nature and our interaction with it builds knowledge and respect for our relationships with each other and our environment.

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References