

София 2026 | Град на Децата

Градове в диалог

Sofia 2026 | City of Children

Cities in dialogue

10:30–12:30

Нов поглед към детството

Rethinking early childhood



Federico
Ruozzi



Ina
Furtenbach



Roland
Kern



Dr Charmaine
Bonello

София 2026 | Град на Децата

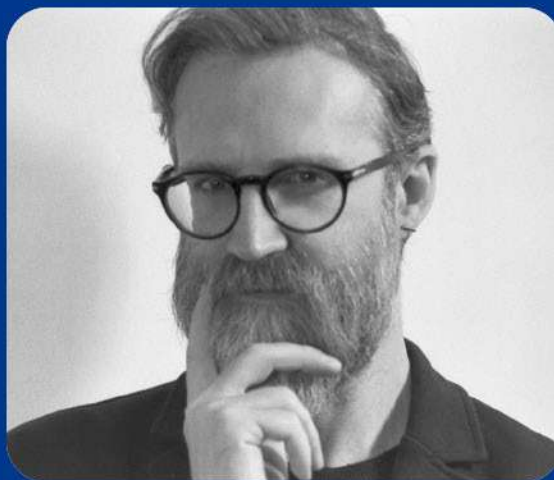
Градове В диалог

Град, който Взима децата на сериозно

Политическите избори за
опита на Регжо Емилия

Федериоко Руоци

Председател на
институцията за детски
градини и ясли към община
Регжо Емилия, Италия



Sofia 2026 | City of Children

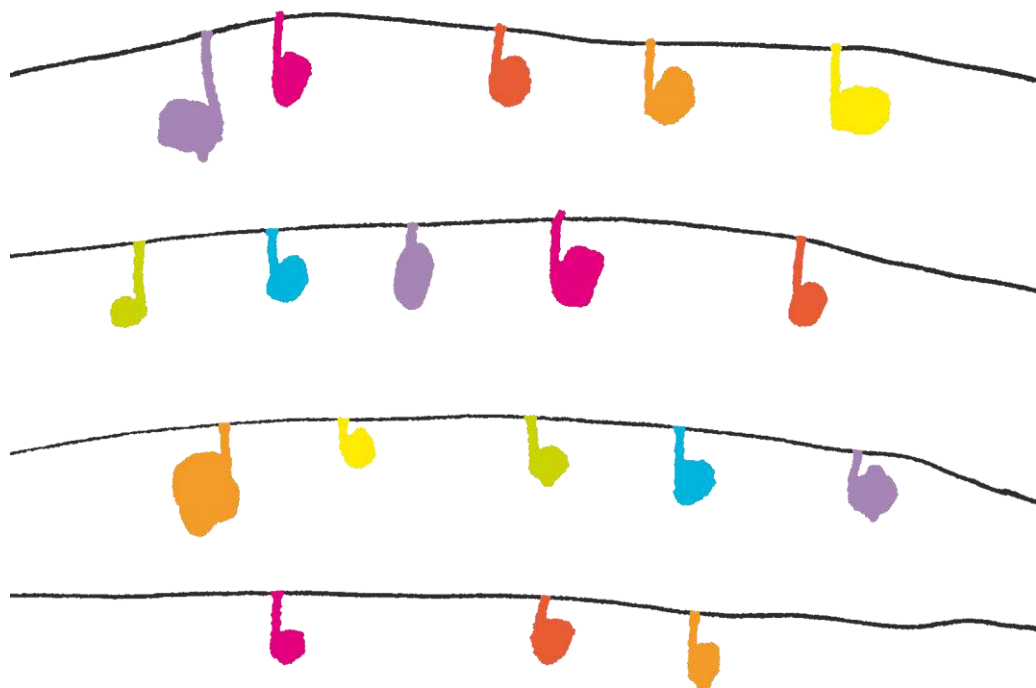
Cities in dialogue

When a City Takes Its Children Seriously

The Political Choice Behind
the Reggio Emilia Experience

Federico Ruozzi

President of the Istituzione for
Preschools and Infant-Toddler
Centres, Municipality of
Reggio Emilia, Italy



Federico Ruozzi

President of Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres
Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia

Sofia, September 25, 2025



SCUOLE E NIDI D'INFANZIA
Istituzione del
Comune di Reggio Emilia
REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH®





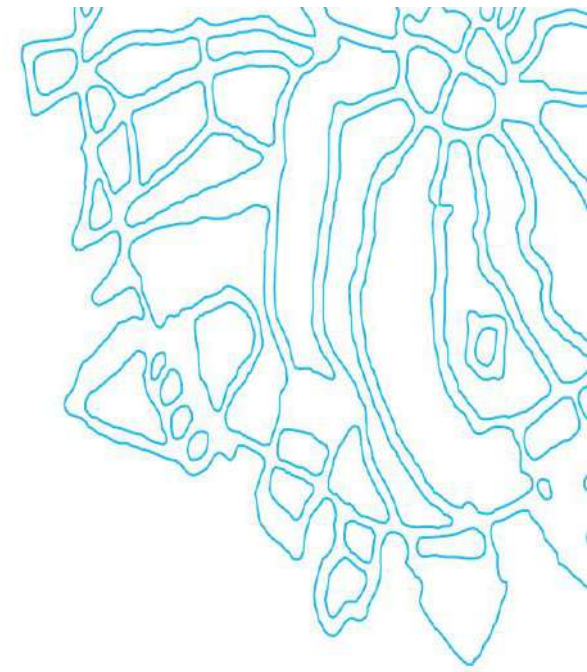
Municipality of Reggio Emilia

Infant-toddler
centres

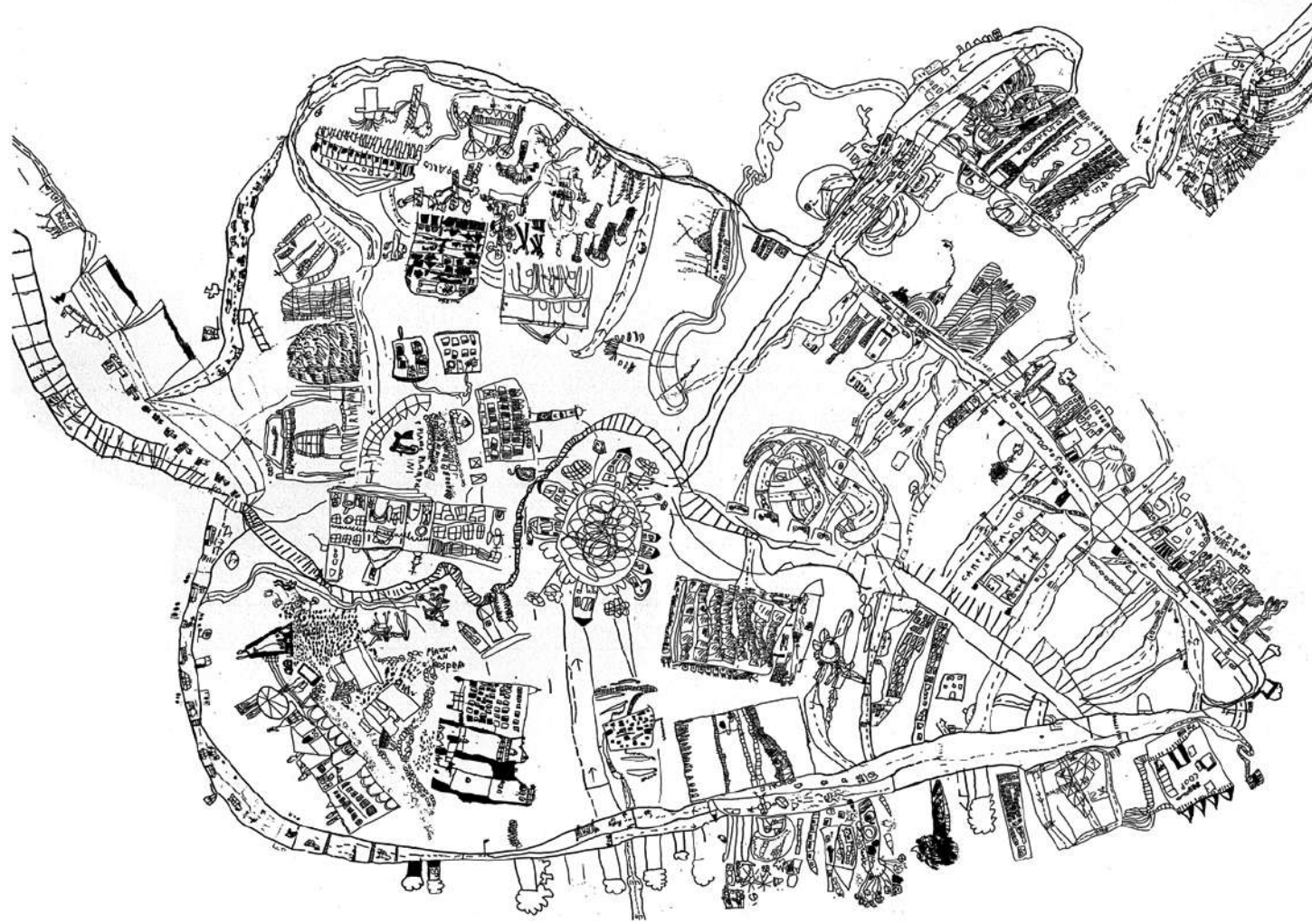
- 13** directly managed – full time
- 13** indirectly managed
- 1** affiliated infant-toddler centre
- 1** private infant-toddler centre

preschools

- 20** directly managed – full time
- 1** part-time
- 8** indirectly managed
- 3** equal
- 19** FISM (Catholic schools with infant-toddler centre classes)
- 14** state





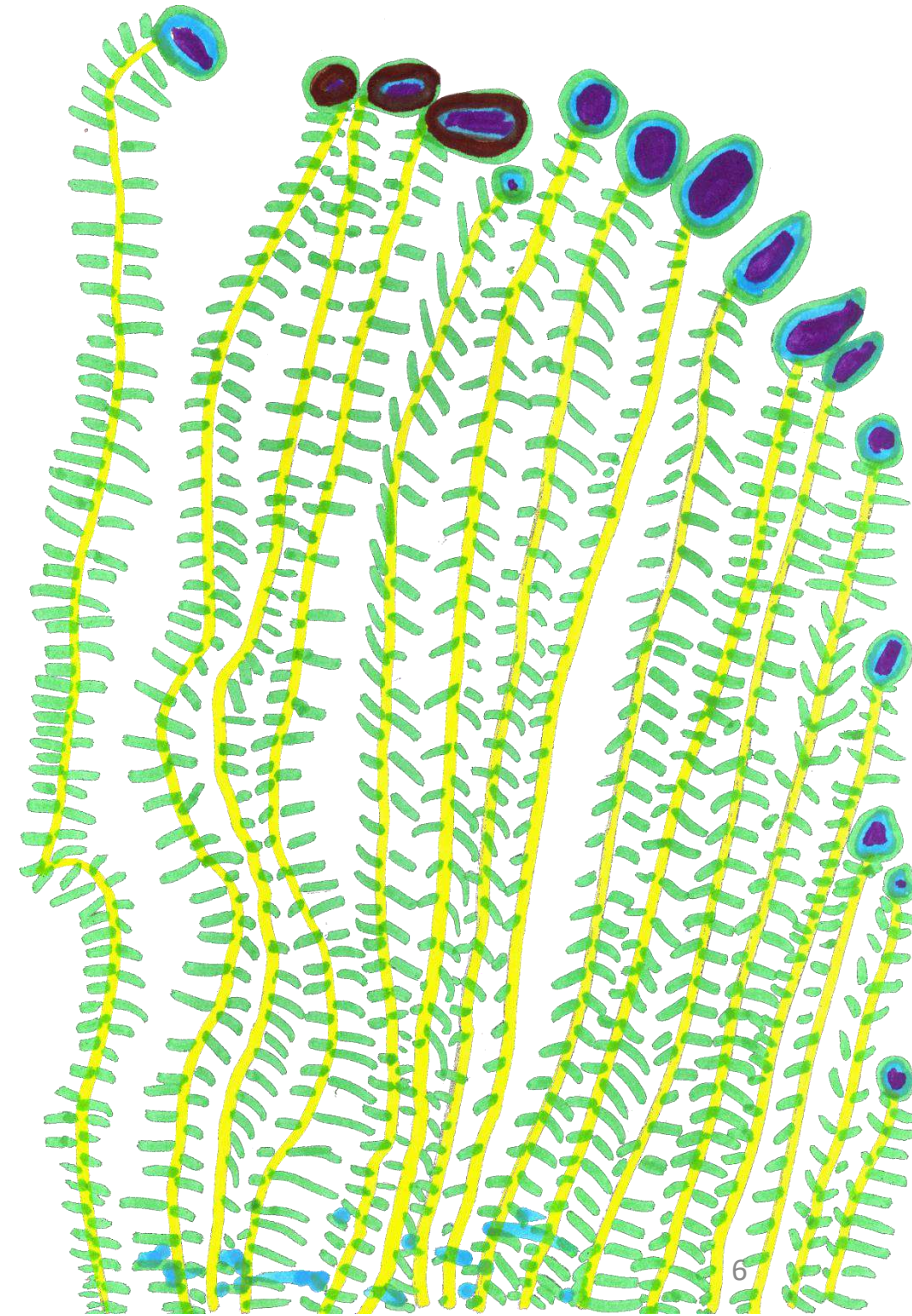


The city-leaf

Children aged 4 and 5

Schools are laboratories for political, civic and cultural innovation within the city

Education Commons





The New York Times

In 1972, Rodari led a weeklong seminar for teachers in Reggio Emilia, an Italian town that was (and is) a bastion of experimental education. His week there inspired “The Grammar of Fantasy,” which is imbued with the child-centered, play-based spirit of the Reggio approach to schooling. The book is funny, freewheeling and angry, animated by Rodari’s fury at an educational system in which “*imagination* is still treated like a poor relation of *attention* and *memory*.”



After the II World War





«Men and women alike, we built the walls of this school together because we wanted it to be new and different for our children»

Scuola comunale dell'infanzia "XXV APRILE"

UOMINI E DONNE. INSIEME.
ABBIAMO COSTRUITO I
MURI DI QUESTA SCUOLA.
PERCHE' LA VOLEVAMO
NUOVA E DIVERSA
PER I NOSTRI FIGLI.

MAGGIO 1945
DA UNA TESTIMONIANZA

Rebuilding society by starting with children



1963

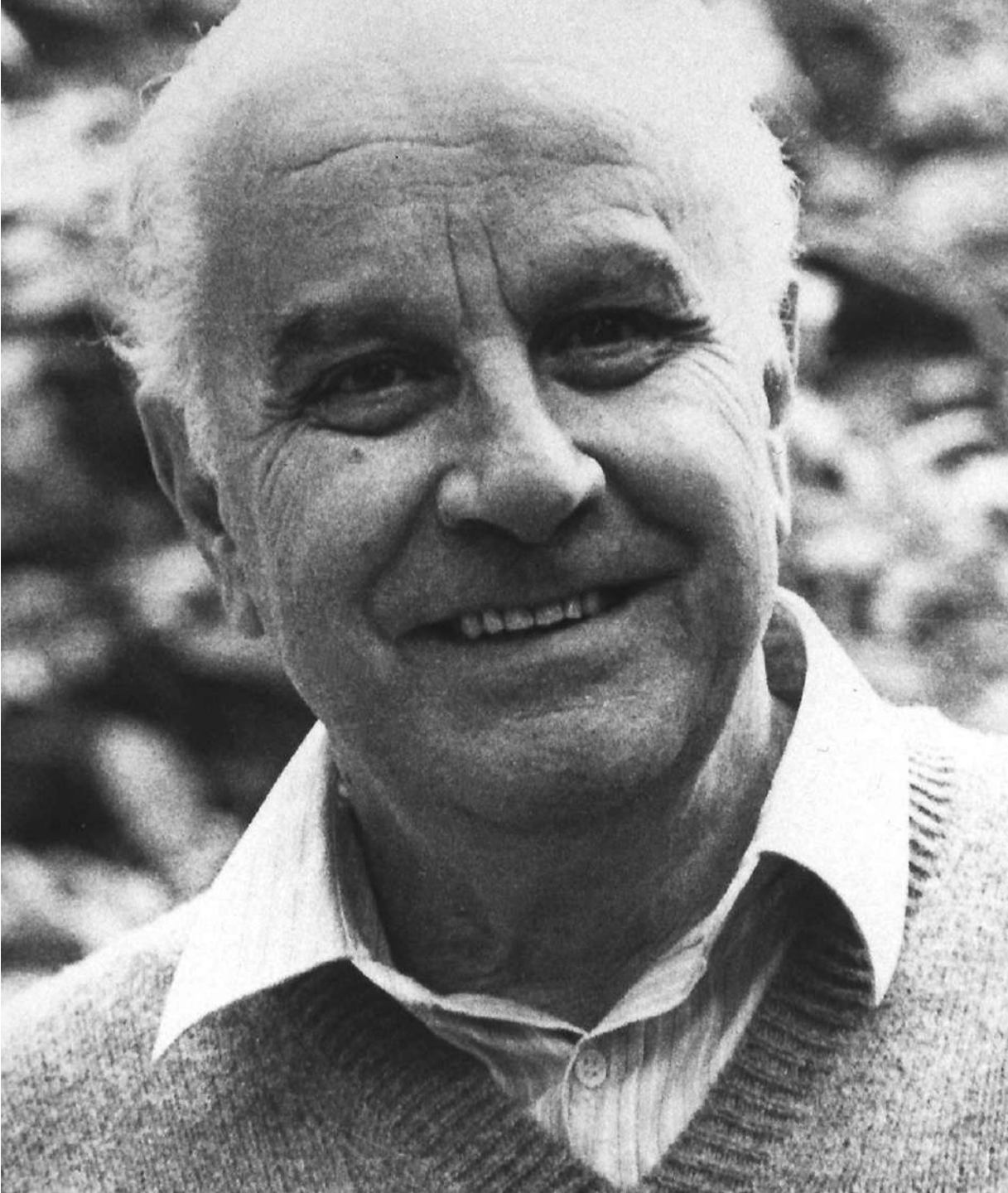
first municipal preschool
opens



1971

first municipal infant-toddler centre opens

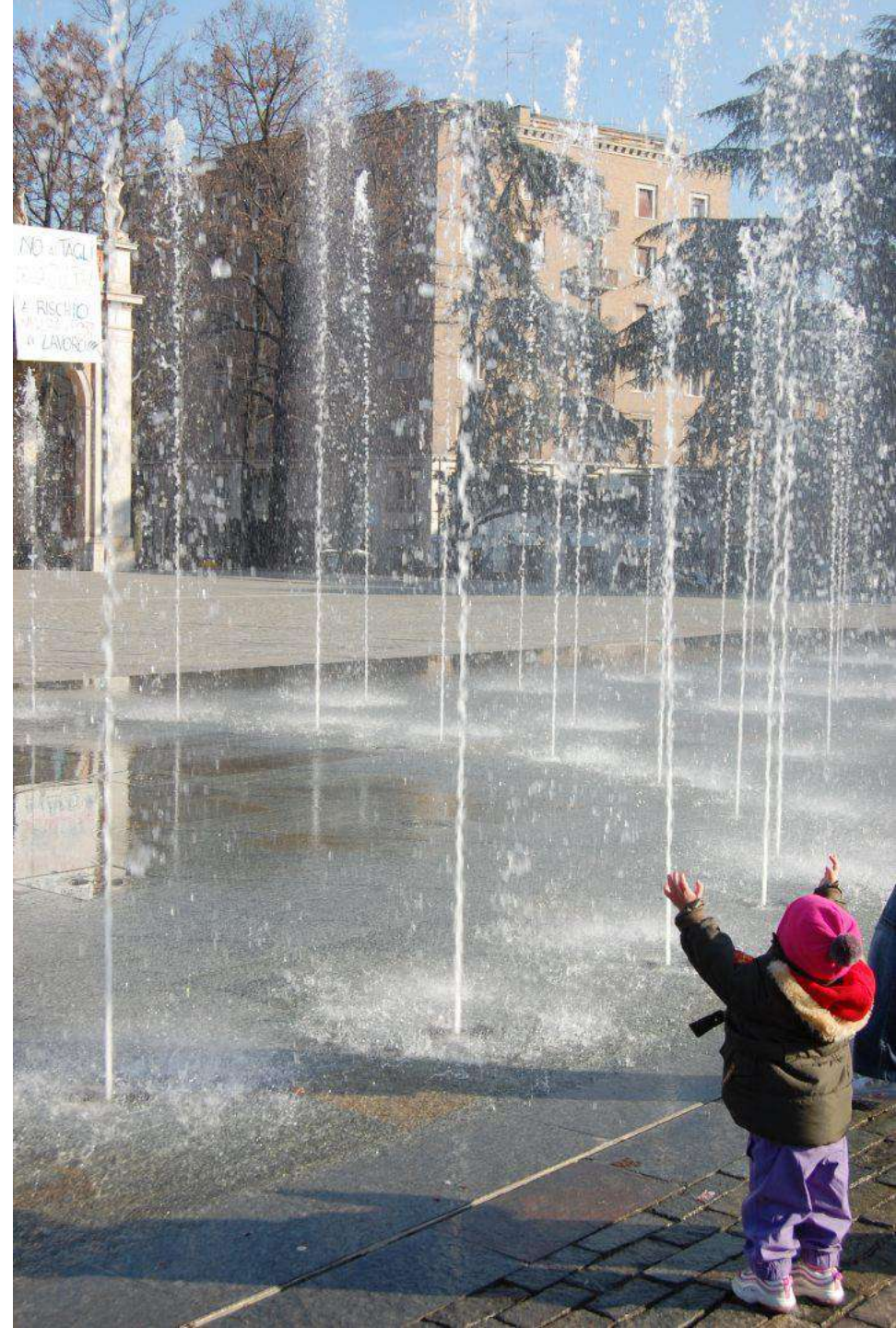


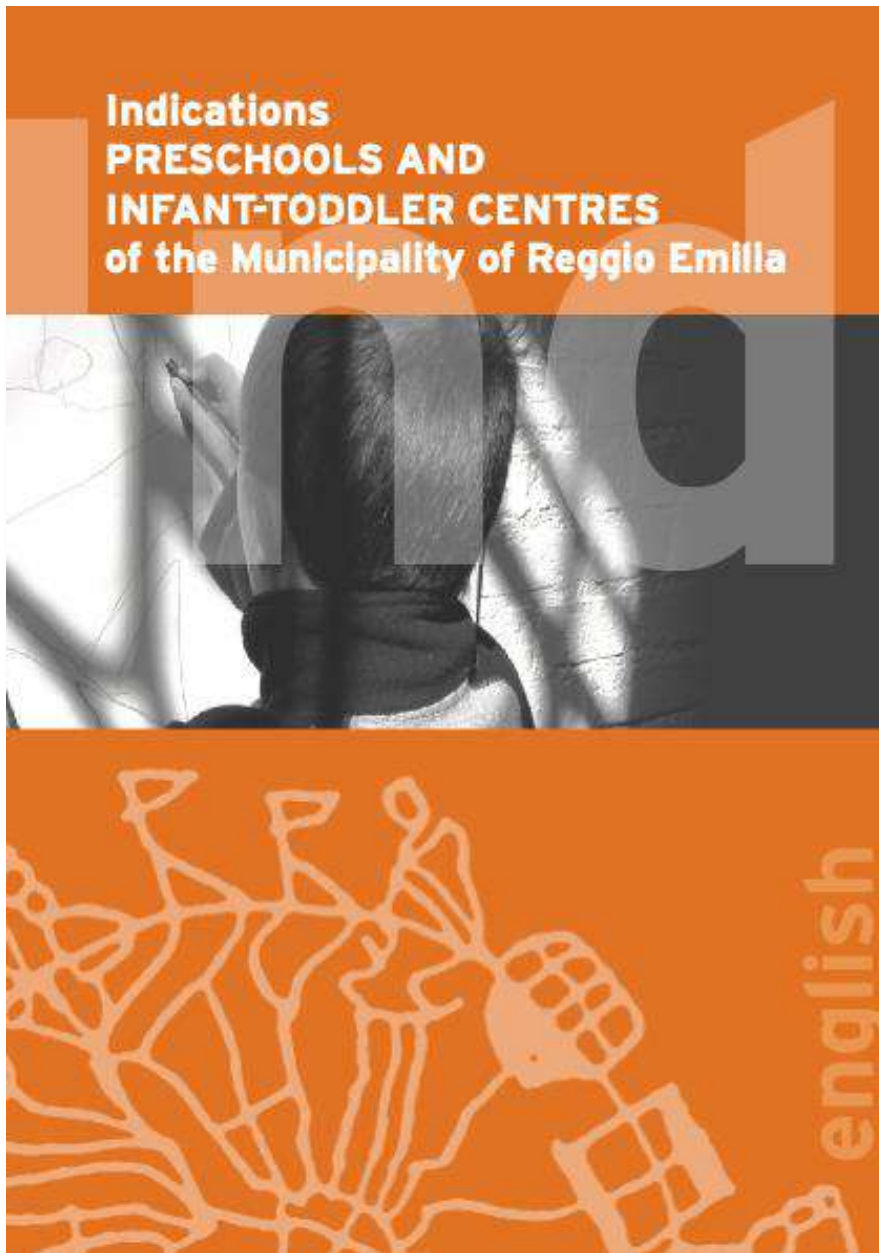


Loris Malaguzzi
1920-1994



**Child
who is
a full
citizen**





1.1 Education is a right

Education is the right of all, of all children, and as such is a responsibility of the community.

Education is an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of the individual and the collective; it is a resource for gaining knowledge and for learning to live together; it is a meeting place where freedom, democracy, and solidarity are practiced and where the value of peace is promoted.

Within the plurality of cultural, ideological, political, and religious conceptions, education lives by listening, dialogue, and participation; it is based on mutual respect, valuing the diversity of identities, competencies, and knowledge held by each individual and is therefore qualified as secular and open to exchange and cooperation.

Traces of Children's Drawings in the City



Santa Maria Hospital and CORE, Oncology and Hematology Centre, Reggio Emilia

Words of Peace



Imagine a forest





working with
recycled materials

Remida Day



Reggionarra



*Italy is everything.
Reggio Emilia is just a
piece in the middle of
Italy, because cities are
pieces of the world.*





traces of
the city's
schools.

The
theatre
curtain
designed
by the
children

**“...you cannot understand the schools of Reggio Emilia,
if you do not understand the city itself, the community.”**

Jerome Bruner psychologist

“Reggio Emilia, example of ethical community. ”

Howard Gardner, psychologist

**“Early childhood education investment
is investment into the future of the community .”**

James Heckman , Nobel Prize for Economy

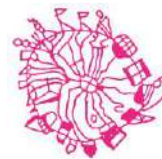
**“The preschools of Reggio Emilia (...) were organised in this way by Loris Malaguzzi and
this is why they continue to work : soliciting an integration of physical and intellectual
development, with stimuli for the imagination and the growing need for rationality.”**

Tullio De Mauro, linguist and former Italian Minister of Public Education

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and Reggio Children

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For further information: info@reggiochildren.it



SCUOLE E NIDI D'INFANZIA
Istituzione del
Comune di Reggio Emilia
REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH®



От добри детски градини към Висококачествена система

Как градът осигурява
качествено образование
за Всяко дете?

Ина Фуртенбах

ръководител на администрацията
за предучилищно образование в
град Бурос, Швеция



From Good Preschools to a Good Preschool System

How Can a City Guarantee
Quality for Every Child?

Ina Furtenbach,

Head of the Preschool
Administration, City of Borås,
Sweden

From good preschools to good preschool systems -

How can a city guarantee
quality for every child?

Ina Furtenbach

Director of Early childhood Education

Municipality of Borås
Sweden



BORÅS STAD

Facts

- Sweden 10 million
- Borås 114 000 inhabitants
- 72 preschools
- 1400 teachers
- 50 headmasters
- 6000 children

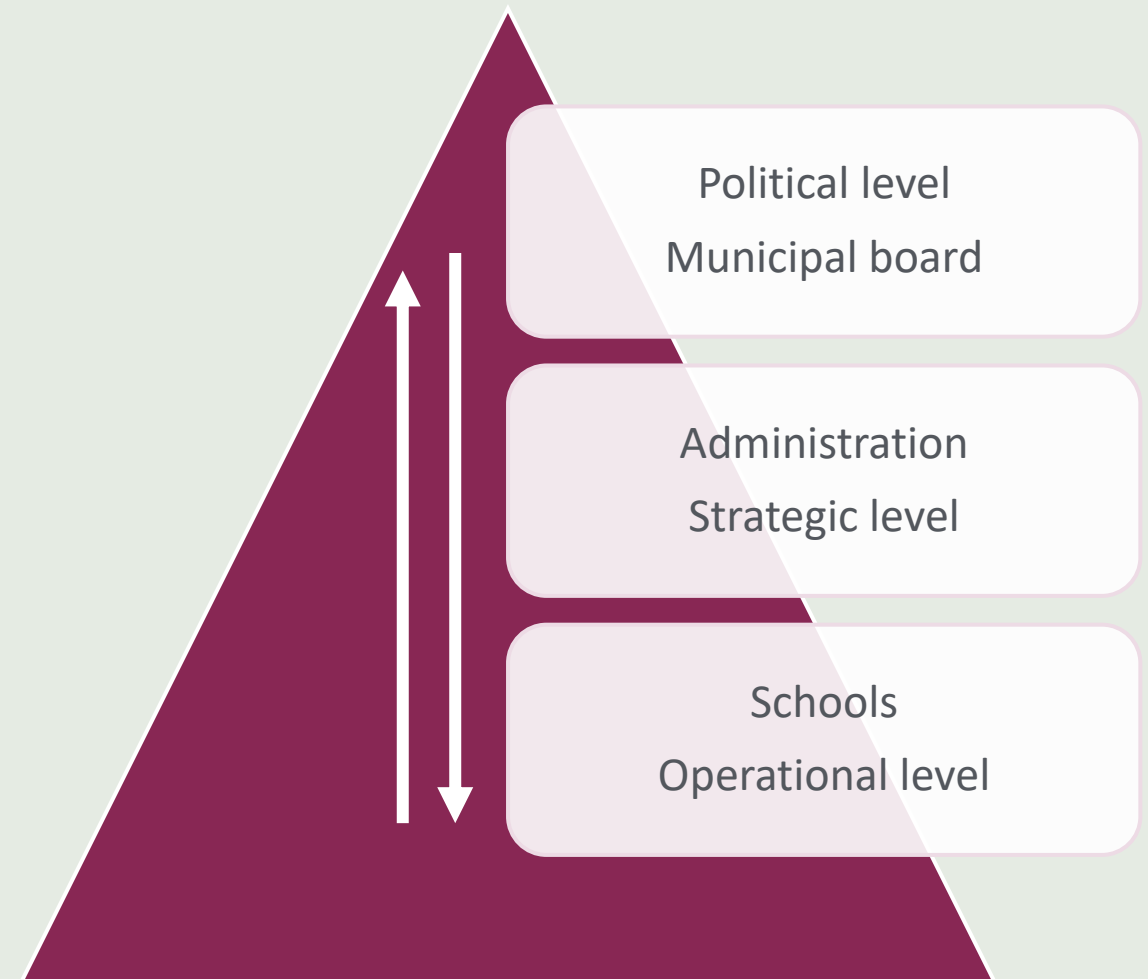


Purpose of ECE

- Social differences
- Lift productivity through education
- Nativity
- Early intervention
- Democracy



When challenges get severe,
good strategies matter more



What is important?

- Vision – shared by everyone
- Strategy- How get there? Priorities
- Activities – define, connect with everyday work



BORÅS
STAD

The child

Every child should encounter high-quality, creative teaching enabling them to develop to their fullest potential

- Competent and full of potential
- Eager to explore, connect and build relationships
- Equal in dignity and rights

Every child should be given the opportunity to develop understanding and respect for others, as well as a sense of participation and belonging

- Democracy



Cognitive abilities are important determinants of human development.

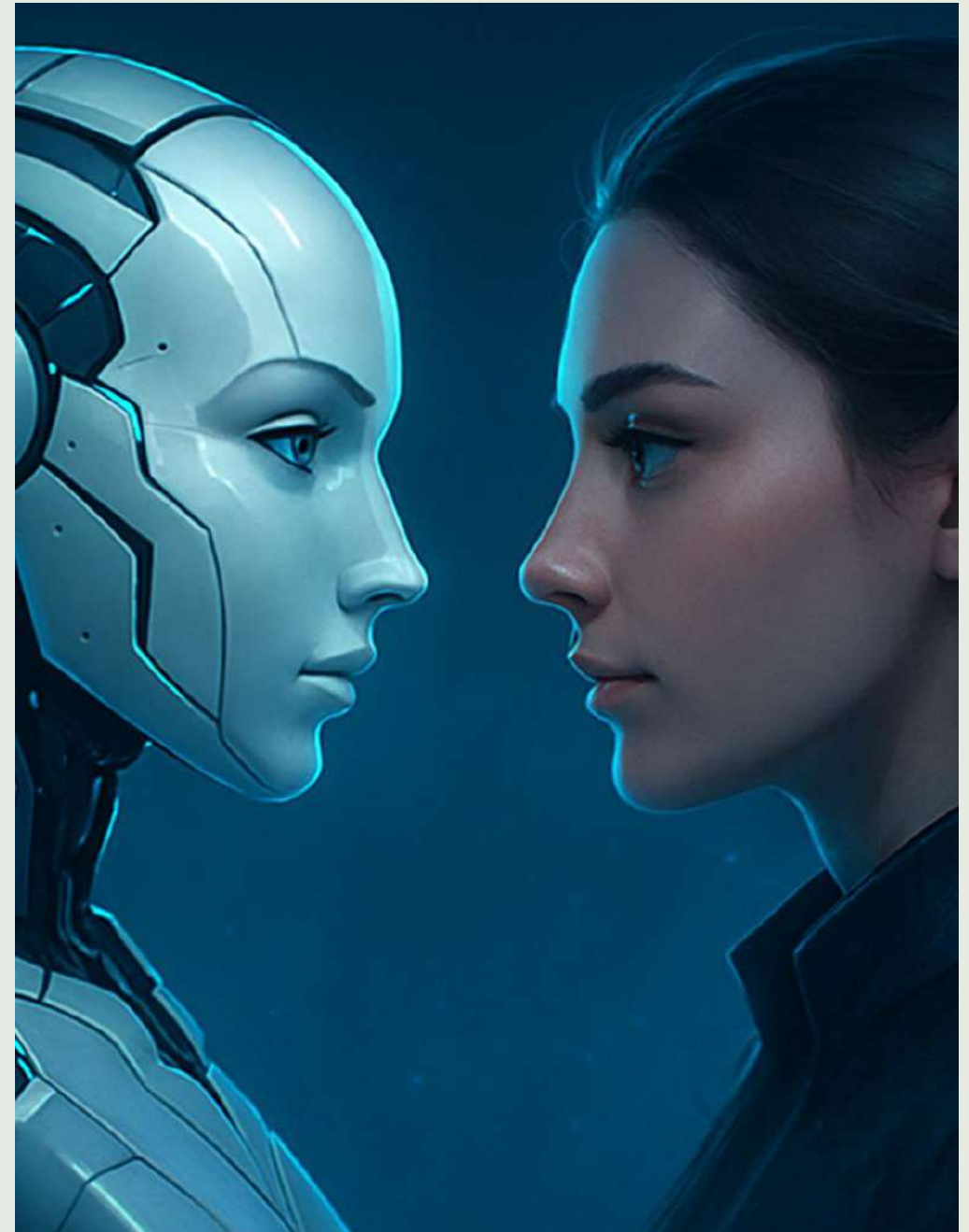
So are:

- socio-emotional skill
- physical and mental health
- perseverance
- attention
- motivation
- self confidence



AI and us

- Manipulation and closeness
- Confirmation, A friend that knows everything, have read everything and never gets tired
- AGI- intelligence as a human resource
- Children, empathy, caring and presens
- Creativity, fantasy to analysis, critical thinking,



Moving from knowledgebased to competence based learning

- "All children should learn what a circle is."
- "We are going to create conditions for all children to meet different shapes and be stimulated to explore them together."

Which possibilities to learn do these different approaches create?

How can learning be followed from these two perspectives?

How does the classroom change with the two approaches?

Exempel Martina Lundström

Teachers

- Offer rich opportunities for professional development and in-house training
- Organisation for collective learning
- Enables teachers to learn with and from each other
- Teachers need time to learn, reflect and develop their practice.
- Pedagogy is a conversation based on asking questions, inviting participation and creating conditions in which the teachers can grow and learn



Creating a culture of professional confrontation

- Teachers way of working is mainly influenced by own experience, meeting and discussing with colleagues and children.
- Sustainable change is created by using teachers own experience as a motor in the school development process.

Sharing ideas and knowledge



New role of the leader

- Leadership must be buildt on trust
- Inspire, support, challenge
- Teachers voices need to be heard
- Manageable assignement, high expectations, professional authonomy and strong support.



BORÅS
STAD

Classroom

- Aesthetically appealing and functional that provide a good working environment for children and adults
- Promote play, learning and health
- Support the values of the education:
 - Exploration
 - Social and emotional competence
 - Motivation
 - Creativity



Creating a functional organisation

- To see reality as a system means to see how the individual parts of the system depends on each other and together creates the system itself.
- To organise means to help these parts to be aware of each other and behave like a unity.



Balancing between control and empowerment

Human sustainability is a business strategy

- Health
- Development
- Work-life balance
- Sense of meaning

Over controlling stifles innovation

People need freedom to move

Good leaders build structures where people can act freely within meaningful boundaries



A functional system where every part supports the whole

- Supporting and stimulating development towards the goals in the curriculum
- Systematic quality work
- Strengthen every school's motivation and capacity for improvement
- Identify needs, follow up results and give support to preschools
- Set in place structures for collaboration



Creating favorable conditions

Economy – resources focused on preschools keeping administration low

Resilience – safe and stable in times of crisis

The best interest of the child must be considered in every part of the organisation



Потребители на услуги или съавтори?

Родителите, педагозите
и силата на
самоорганизацията

Роланд Керн

DaKS – Обединение на берлинските
родителски инициативи за детски
градини и училища, Берлин, Германия



Service Users or Co-Creators?

Parents, Educators and the
Power of Self-Organisation

Roland Kern

DaKS – Association of Berlin Parent
Initiatives for Kindergartens and
Schools, Berlin, Germany



Service-Users or Co-Creators?

Parents, Educators and the Power of Self-Organisation

Roland Kern, DaKS,
for SOFIA – CITY OF CHILDREN, 25.9.26





Something about DaKS

DaKS – Association of Berlin Parent Initiatives for Kindergartens, After-School-Clubs and Schools

- We are lobbying for and give advice to parent initiatives and other small self-organized childcares, after-school-clubs and independent schools
- We are organizing 943 kindergartens (out of 2.900 in Berlin), 45 after-school-clubs and 32 independent schools – all together they are responsible for 36.100 children
- Together with other associations we negotiate with the authorities about regulations and finances
- For our members we give informations and advice how to run a kindergarten/after-school-club/school and we provide an accounting service
- We exist since 1986 and celebrate our 40. anniversary this year



What are parent initiatives?

- Small kindergartens, after-school-clubs and independent schools runned by an independent association formed by parents and educators
 - Small = 15-25 children at a kindergarten or 60-100 at a school
- The majority of the members of that association must be parents and they have the power and the responsibility to make all essential decisions for their institution
 - 750 members which run 1.000 institutions – the regular model is one association runs one institution
- In Berlin we still call these kindergartens „Kinderläden“ („children shops“)
 - Comes from the location in ground floor rooms often previously used by small shops
 - „Kinderladen“ still smells more alternative and somewhat rebellious





Some Numbers

Berlin

- official statistic: 509 parent initiatives (only kindergartens) in 2025 – out of 2.871 kindergartens (17,7 %)
 - based on self-designation, real number somewhat higher

Germany

- Official statistic: 3.900 parent initiatives in 2025 – out of 61.031 kindergartens (6,4 %)

Timeline

- 2008: 4.370 parent initiatives (8,7 %)

The typical German parent initiative is urban and Western German. And it lasts over generations.



Roots of parent initiatives

Student movement 1968

- Founding of the first „Kinderläden“
- Criticism on authoritarianism in society and education
- „Education to Disobedience“
- Female self-organisation within the student movement

Alternative Movement (70s/80s)

- New social movements for peace, environmental issues and third world justice
- Parent initiatives as part of an „alternative movement“

Lack of childcare opportunities

- Rise of female employment needs childcare opportunities
- Severe lack in Western Germany and parent initiatives as cheapest and fastest way for building up lacking capacities

Tradition of free providers

- German welfare system is based on „free providers“ and the principle „help to help yourself“
- Parent initiatives fit well into these principles



Parent initiatives within German childcare system



- Kinderladen-Movement of the early 1970s as part of a fundamental change in German welfare/childcare-system
 - Kinderläden/parent initiatives as pioneers and laboratories
- Main aspects of Kinderladen-education are now common sense
 - Children as equal human beings with inalienable own rights
 - Education as an self-willed process, co-constructed by children and educators
- Other succesfull pioneerings by parent initiatives:
 - Integration of children with disabilities into regular kindergartens
 - Childcares for under 3years (formerly unusual in Western Germany)
- Otherness of parent initiatives lies now more in structural aspects
 - Voluntary organization by non-experts and in small units vs. professionalization and centralization
- parent initiatives are still pioneers at
 - Some special concepts (forest kindergartens, gender-awareness)
 - Self-organization of minorities (bilingual families, religious groups)



Inside a parent initiative

- First of all: It's a normal childcare with all its tasks and purposes
 - Supporting families
 - First step of the educational system
 - Enabling parents to work
- Daily life organized by pedagogues – paid staff
- Organization is provided by the provider association – voluntary commitment
- Executive board: 3-5 members of the association who run the organizational matters – mostly parents, sometimes pedagogues, often mixed
- Tasks: Every family takes the responsibility for a certain task (cleaning, repairs, selection and onboarding of new families or staff, buy food or nappies, maintain the website, organizing parties ...)



Requirements

Internal

- People who are prepared to invest commitment and time
- Educators who take a lot of responsibility for their work and for themselves
- Parents who not only look for customer service but for a place to shape with the educators and other families

External

- Childcare-system which is open to independent providers
- Authorities who take into account the special needs of parent initiatives and voluntary commitment
- Advice centers like DaKS who support parents and educators



What's special at parent initiatives

- Education
 - In theory we're not so special anymore (exception: schools)
 - In practise you will see a difference („Anderer Umgang“)
- Structure
 - Decisions are made by directly affected people
 - Organization is based on voluntary commitment and is often done by non-experts
- Size
 - Small size means everybody counts
- Role of parents
 - Parents are not only deliverer of the educational objects (and of cakes for the summer party) but necessary part for the very functioning of the institution





What's special at parent initiatives

- Double roles
 - Special task: if you are customer and CEO at the same time
 - Even more tricky: if you are staff and employer at the same time
 - Needs reflected people and good regulations for management of conflicts
- Changing responsibilities
 - Persons in charge are changing continually – sometimes exhausting for external partners (and for the staff as well), but also chances for new developments
 - Usually high continuity within the educators

Most of these things are chance and burden at the same time



Benefits

Children

- Small groups, very responsive to individual needs
- Childcare close to family-structures

Parents

- childcare very close to the own family-values
- usually very close connections between the families (extended family)
- work within the executive board provides abilities for life

Educators

- very self-determined work, possibility to shape the childcare
- close connections to children and their families

Authorities

- reliable part of childcare-system
- very motivated counterparts
- institutions which are very close to the needs of the families
- fastest way to get new childcare-capacities if you need some

Society

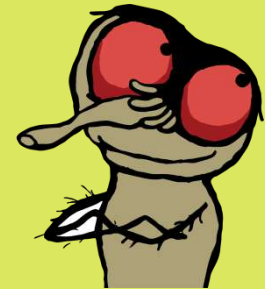
- parent initiatives as (pre)schools for democracy and civic participation



And what is it really about?



Any questions?



If there are any questions
tomorrow...



roland.kern@daks-berlin.de





Благодаря



Чия Всъщност е учебната програма?

От преподаване към
съвместно учене

Д-р Шармейн Бонело

Старши преподавател по
предучилищно и начално образование
към Факултет по педагогика,
Университет на Малта



Whose Curriculum Is It Anyway?

From Teaching Children to
Co-Constructing Learning

Dr Charmaine Bonello

Senior Lecturer in Early
Childhood and Primary
Education, Faculty of
Education, University of Malta

Whose Curriculum Is It Anyway?

From Teaching Children to Co-Constructing Learning



Dr. Charmaine Bonello
University of Malta



L-Università
ta' Malta

Cities in Dialogue | Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' | 25 September 2026 | Keynote



SOFIA UNIVERSITY
ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI



The Harbour Was Our First Classroom



The sea, bastion walls, workshops and
alleyways were co-creators of curriculum.

FROM RESTRICTIVE TO GENERATIVE: TWO CURRICULUM ECOLOGIES

Same children. Same city. Different possibilities.

*Different
environments.
Different
outcomes.*

*Real places.
Real people.
Real learning.*

Restrictive Curriculum Ecology



Generative Curriculum Ecology



Fixed spaces

→ Adaptable spaces



Recipients

→ Contributors



Detached
knowledge

→ Place-based
inquiry



Safety as
restriction

→ Shared
responsibility



Community as
visitor

→ Community as
co-educator

MARSAMXETT
MALTA



PEOPLE
PLACES
POSSIBILITIES

Children's Civic Practice in Public Space



Claim space

Organise participation

Negotiate rules

Act together

Children practise participation not as a future ideal, but as part of everyday life.

Children Did Not Wait for a Pitch: They Made One

Spatial authorship



*Children do not only use spaces,
they remake them.*

The City's Curricular Affordances

A vibrant scene of children playing in a harbor. In the foreground, several children are engaged in various activities: one boy is playing with a small sailboat in the water, while others are sitting on stone steps, playing with wooden crates, ropes, and small stones. A girl is standing and holding a long rope. In the background, a historic city with a large dome and other buildings is visible across the water. Several small boats are docked in the harbor. The scene is set in a harbor with stone steps and a historic city in the background. The children are playing with various objects like ropes, crates, and stones. The city in the background has a large dome and other buildings. The water is blue and there are several boats in the harbor. The sky is clear and blue. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Children transformed affordances into inquiry.

Materials - Gradients - Water - Tools - Surfaces - Relationships

Graduated, Socially Supported Risk



Notice



Assess



Test



Adjust



Try again

Which risks are developmentally valuable and how can we make them manageable and equitable?

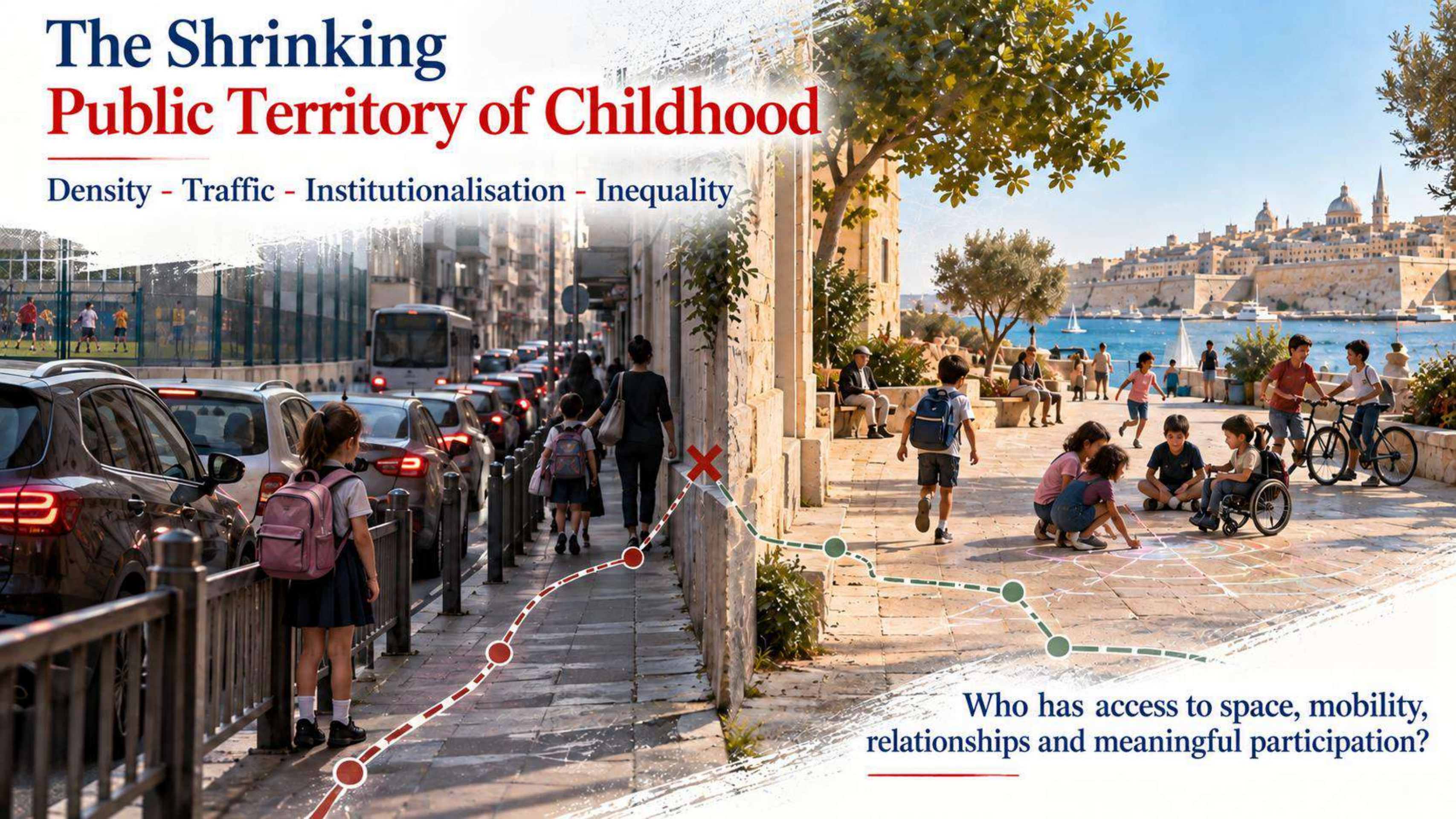
Il-Qoxra:

A Local Language of Resilience



The Shrinking Public Territory of Childhood

Density - Traffic - Institutionalisation - Inequality



Who has access to space, mobility,
relationships and meaningful participation?

Wicçhom 'l Isfel: What Is Being Displaced?

From faces in the sea to heads toward the screen



What meaningful alternatives
do our cities make possible?

Irħula Edukattivi

Educational Villages

A civic arrangement in which children, places and institutions share responsibility for learning and belonging.



Urban
planning
for play



Curricular
permeability



The distant
watchful eye

Children are learners,
citizens and co-authors
of public life.

PRINCIPLE 1: Urban Planning for Play

1

Soft Edges

Transforming concrete boundaries into accessible, tactile environments.



Climbable walls and steps



Tactile, natural materials (stone, plants)



Seating, nooks and informal play spaces

2

Pedestrian Learning Hubs

Reclaiming streets from cars to create safe canvases for unstructured movement.



Car-free or low-traffic streets



Open spaces for play, creativity and social interaction



The city as a living classroom

3

Protected Coastal & Green Spaces

Ensuring natural environments are highly accessible without adult chaperoning.



Accessible waterfronts, beaches and green corridors



Direct, safe access to nature



Space to explore, move and take risks

KEY TAKEAWAY

We must design cities for citizens and children, **not just for vehicles.**



Streets as Spaces for Play



The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca   September 16, 2025 · 

Playstreets in Żebbuġ - a project by the Żebbuġ Children's Council - is still going strong after 6 months! 🎉👏

A street is closed for a few hours once a month to give children the space to play outdoors safely. We're so proud of the children's council members for this initiative, and very grateful for [Steve Zammit Lupi](#) and [Kunsill Lokali Haż-Żebbuġ](#) for your support, and for bringing the children's vision to life! 🥰👏

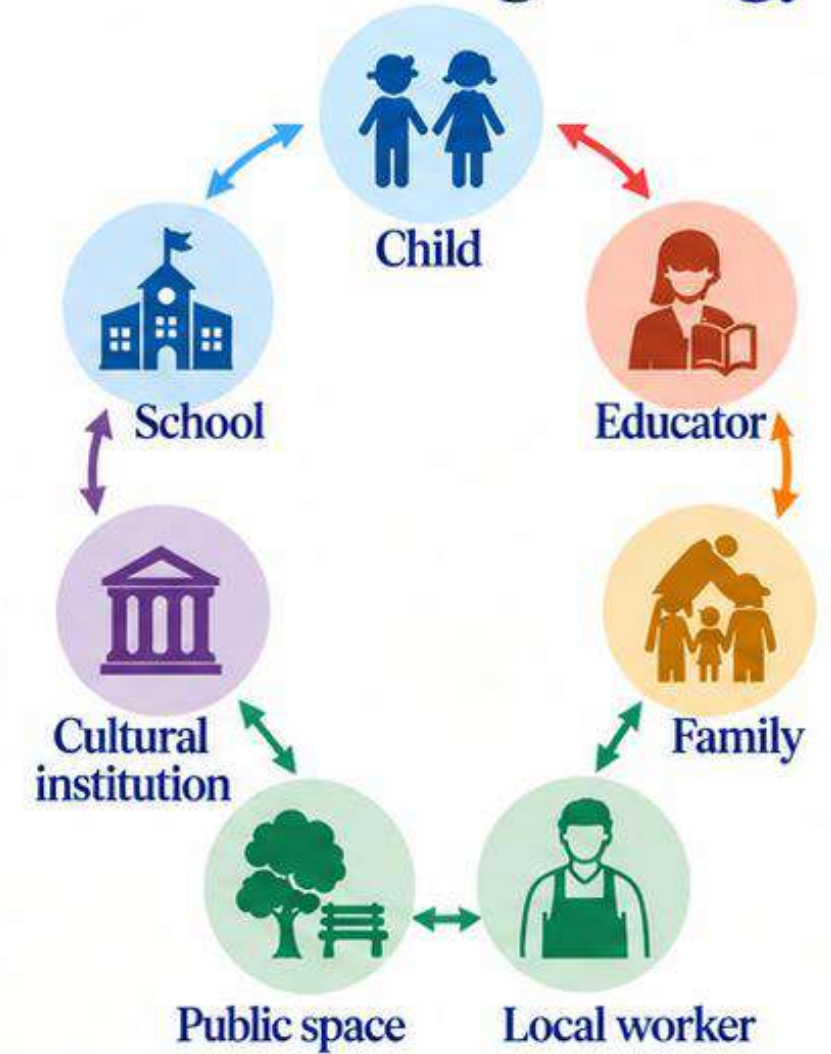
[#childparticipation](#) [#RightToPlay](#) [#mfws](#)

Temporarily closing the street
turns everyday neighbourhood
space into children's space.

Principle 2: Curricular Permeability



Local learning ecology:



Curriculum is strengthened when children encounter ideas where they have social, cultural and practical meaning.

From Marsamxett to Practice

The Harbour Pedagogical Framework

Children co-construct meaning through place, materials, peers and community.

Educators listen, document, interpret, extend and connect.

The Harbour Approach



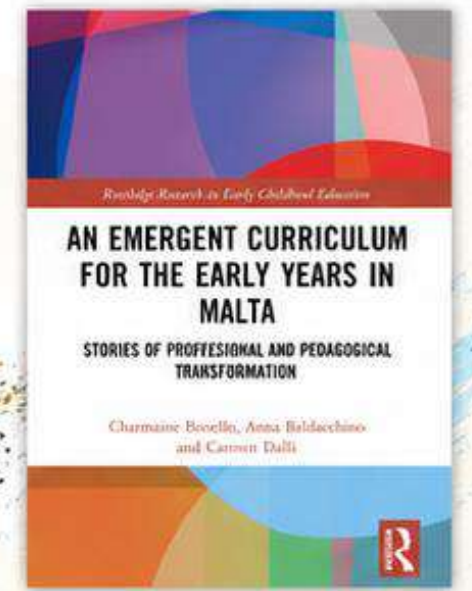
Anchor: Grounded pedagogical intent & ethical care



Open Water: Child agency, emergent inquiry & risk

Co-Constructing Pedagogy With Babies and Toddlers

Co-construction is planning that remains accountable to children's signals, working theories and social worlds.



Research source:
*An Emergent Curriculum
for the Early Years in Malta*
Bonello, Baldacchino & Dalli (2025)



Co-Constructing Curriculum in the Early Primary Years

Children's questions → Purposeful inquiry → Formal knowledge



Formal knowledge becomes more rigorous
when it is mobilised for purposes children
recognise and help to shape.

Principle 3: The Distant Watchful Eye

*Different
generations.
Same harbour.
Stronger
communities.*



Collective care

Adults present,
attentive and
accountable.



**The Distant
Watchful Eye**
Support without
surveillance or control.



Trusted autonomy

Space to negotiate,
explore and take
manageable risks.



Active inclusion
Every child participates
with dignity, safety
and belonging.

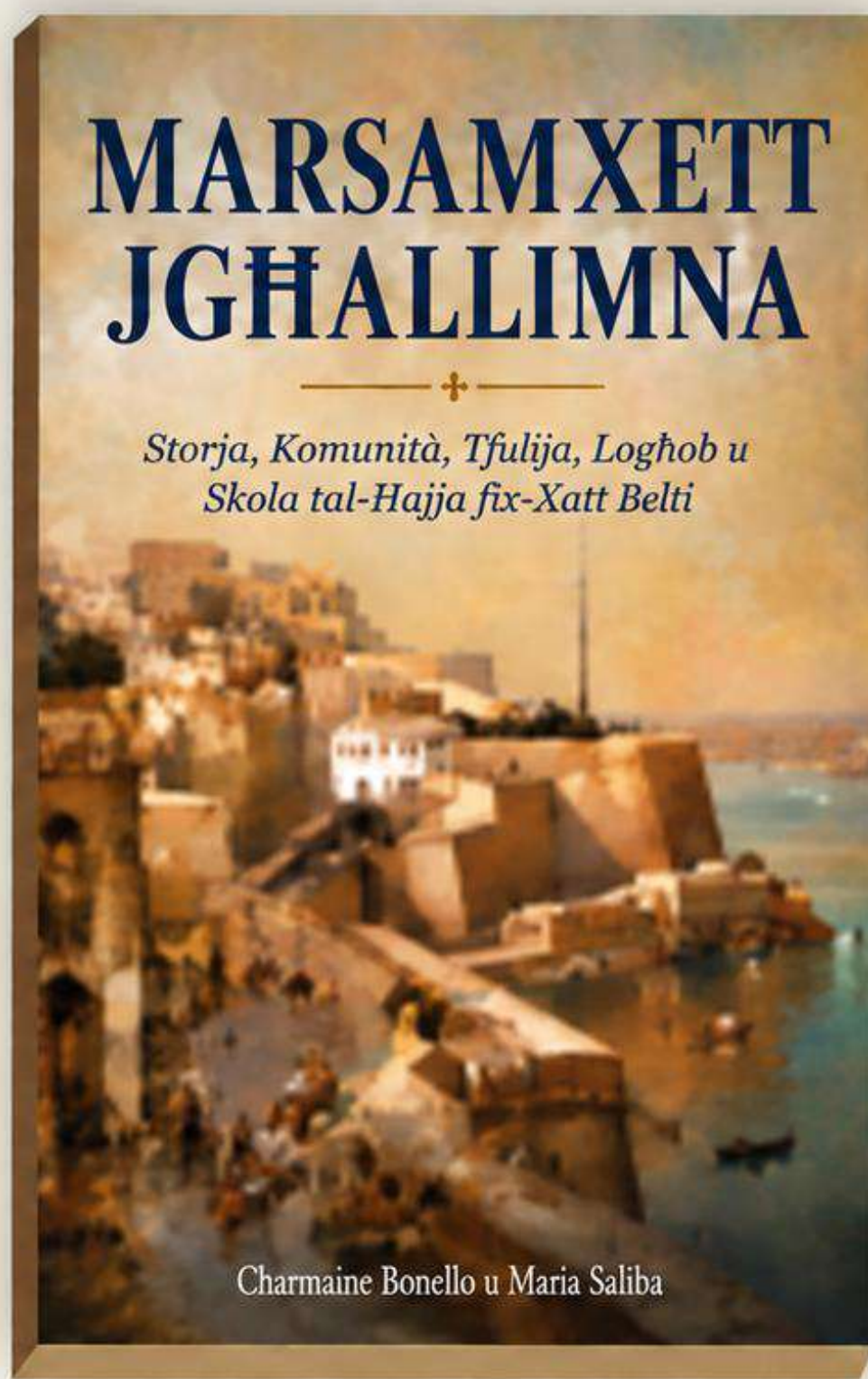


**Shared community
responsibility**
Families, neighbours,
educators and local workers
enable public life.



Civic continuity
Participation can grow
into membership,
responsibility and
community care.





The Conversation Continues

Marsamxett Jghallimna

Forthcoming 2027

A Socio-Educational Manifesto

*Incorporating the Irħula Edukattivi model
for urban policy and curriculum*

The Harbour Approach

An evolving theoretical horizon for critical place-based inquiry

**An open invitation to co-construct. Adapt it to your quay,
park, or square.**



Every City Teaches. What Will Yours Teach Children?



Благодаря | Thank you | **Grazzi minn qalbi!**

Contact: Dr. Charmaine Bonello | Sofia University Keynote 2026
charmaine.bonello@um.edu.mt

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Audience Q&A

