

been symbolic beings/images of freedom. Maya Angelou wrote of the “caged bird” and mentioning it could spark a connection for you during these unprecedented times.

I *feel* every line of Malaguzzi’s writing. I draw attention to the black, male child in the United States in this quote, “Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child (p. 52).” I take this Malaguzzi quote and direct this statement to the United States about the black child and how our country has chosen to relate to him. Many of us see the young black child and are impressed with his promise, yet for centuries far too many Americans looked at the black child and perceived him as a threat. This perception cages the black child, and often kills him.

The appalling early childhood suspension and expulsion data, disproportionately representing black children, are markers of where this systematically begins. Early childhood programs can and should work to change this perception. Failure factories [schools] disproportionately affect black children. Where they exist, we are likely to find that access to high-quality education, starting at the entry-point of early childhood, is sparse or non-existent.

Transcending Through Advocacy

Many species of birds, like robins, innately know more about supporting and parenting than humans. The nest is a protective cage for every being inside—especially the young. When the last, smallest, and likely least fed robin fledgling came out days later, both parents equitably spent time walking with it for days before it could fly, and fly it eventually did. The first three fledglings flew within hours of leaving the nest, never caged by inequity or a restrictive environment.

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We live in a country that claims to secure liberty and justice for all, and now equal access to high-quality early childhood education for children of color is paramount. Can’t all society aspire to be like the robin parents? If not, I’m willing to take to the streets, like I have been in Louisville, Kentucky, to ensure that our youngest and most vulnerable black children get the robin parent treatment they deserve.



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Your Image of the Child: Where Evaluation Begins

There are hundreds of different images of the child. Malaguzzi’s essay gives us two of them. He offers us his ‘strong’ image of the child—an image of every child as intelligent, strong, beautiful, and ambitious, most in need of the recognition of their rights and their strengths. Against this, he poses his ‘weak’ image of the child—the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass, and most in need of protection. But, what of the hundreds of others?

Observing and Judging

Malaguzzi calls on us to produce a higher level of observation that *compares* each child’s resources, potential, and present state of mind with our own, in order to work well together. At the same time, he warns us that the child

wants to be observed, but not judged—“when we do judge, things escape us, we do not see things, so we are not able to evaluate in a wide way” (p. 54). What he doesn’t say, however, is that this kind of comparative observation is always a judgment. That’s what allows it to inform action, so we *can* work well together.

We compare where things are to where they could be (resources). We compare where things are to where they have been and to where they might go (potential). We compare what we’d like to do with what we think we can manage. We try things, with some sense of what we hope will happen as a result, and we check to see what actually happens. That our predictions aren’t always sustained isn’t necessarily bad. Sometimes things go better than we expect—or go in other, unanticipated, directions entirely. Surprise presupposes expectation! On occasion, we make predictions that we dearly hope will prove wrong. But, comparison, judgment, and expectation come as a package deal.

Of course, *what* we are comparing to *what* can have the most infinite variety. So, what we choose to compare makes a very great difference. This is where our images come in. All too often, as evaluators, we find ourselves using data for no better reason than that it is available. We have addresses in order to contact families, so we compare neighborhoods. We have attendance data, so we compare “dose” effects. We have screens, and checklists, and tests, and developmental assessments, for lots of reasons—not least because development is *interesting*—so we compare “achievement” and “progress.” But the images that go with these comparisons are ones that often we officially (supposedly) reject!

Our Images of Children

Because comparison, judgment, and expectation are a package deal, yet things escape us when we judge, it’s important to think about how we can evaluate “in a wide way”—keeping in mind that our goal is to build relationships and work well together. It would be easy enough to turn Malaguzzi’s ‘needs’ and ‘musts’ into a checklist and apply it to the evaluation of our systems of children’s services. But such a checklist would become a compliance exercise like any other. If we are truly

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to consider each child’s reality and to forge alliances with families, we need to go into Malaguzzi’s proverbial forest and find each other. We need to consider not just one or two images of the *child*—the one we need and the one we don’t—but *all* those hundreds of images of children and how we might forge alliances, as full citizens, from them.

Yet, it really is a forest. We have only the vaguest idea what all these images (which may or may not actually be hundreds) are. If Malaguzzi’s strong and weak images aren’t the only ones, or the only axis of difference between images, the alternatives aren’t much more helpful. Few accounts go beyond two or three images. Some reduce vast cross-cultural variation onto a single axis of difference. The multiplicity of images of children in different demographic categories seems commonly treated as a separate question entirely. If our images of children are to become a common part of our working knowledge, and not just a heuristic for individual reflection, then finding a better way of articulating and observing them remains an outstanding task.