The work of children and adults in Reggio Emilia

Research and Learning

Reflections by Carla Rinaldi
Edited by Kay Albrecht

Everything that takes place in the life of an infant-toddler center or preschool is the object of a child's research. All the interactions that take place between and among the children, materials, events, and situations are part of this research. As these interactions occur with some regularity, the child begins to construct concepts and theories from his research.

Research is a learning strategy fundamental to the construction of knowledge for both children and adults. It also determines the relationship between teaching and learning. The research of the children becomes the object of the research of the adults, who are engaged in understanding and supporting the learning of children.

Our fundamental assumption, in our work in Reggio Emilia, is that the way each child (and each man and woman) learns about and interprets the world, constructing his or her knowledge, is unique and subjective. We think these differences are important to recognize and welcome. We recognize these differences, encourage them, and think and talk about them in order to learn from them.

In the schools in Reggio, we orient our experience and research on these fundamental ideas:

This article has been edited to facilitate understanding. Although every effort has been made to preserve the voice of the author and the integrity of the ideas, we acknowledge that in the editing there is interpretation.

The Image of the Child

Our definition of the identity, or image, of the child inspires our infant-toddler centers and preschools and determines the nature of our research.

Many different images of children are possible: one can focus on what the child is and has, can be or can do; or from the opposite perspective, one can emphasize what the child is not and does not have, what he or she cannot be or do. The image of the child is above all a cultural (and, therefore, social and political) interpretation that makes it possible to recognize certain qualities and potential in children and to give value to them or, on the contrary, negate them.

The image of the child is a determining factor in defining the social and ethical identity of children, their rights, and the educational contexts that support them.

One of the focal points of the Reggio philosophy, one of its strongest values, as Loris Malaguzzi wrote, is the image of a child who, right from the moment of birth, is so engaged in developing a relationship with the world and intent on experiencing the world that he develops a complex system of abilities, learning strategies, and ways of organizing relationships — a child who is fully able to

Carla Rinaldi has worked as a pedagogist, and director with the municipal infant-toddler center and preschools of Reggio Emilia. She is co-author of various books on the Reggio Emilia municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. Actually, she is teaching at Modena and Reggio Emilia University; during fall semester 2001 she was teaching as visiting professor at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, USA.

create personal maps for his own social, cognitive, affective, and symbolic orientation.

A competent, active, critical child is a child who is *challenging,* because he produces change and movement in his/her society, family, and school. A child produces culture, values, and rights; a child is competent in living and learning, and competent in communicating with her *hundred languages.*

A child is able to assemble and disassemble possible realities, to construct metaphors and creative paradoxes, to construct his own symbols and codes while learning to decode the established symbols and codes. A child is able to attribute meanings to events and attempts to share meanings and stories of meaning.

The Image of the School

An ideal place for development must value this image of the child. Children's competence and motivation can be either enhanced or inhibited depending on the places in which they live.

Numerous studies have brought to light the importance of the adults' roles in young children's development not only by means of direct and targeted actions but also indirectly, when the adults create educational contexts that enable children to utilize their own skills and competence.

This is also an important implication for the organization of the physical spaces in a school for young children. If in fact, as Shaffer affirms, the "innate programming" of each child establishes new objectives, then the pursuit of those objectives is a joint venture between the child and the adult who intervenes indirectly as well as directly.

The physical and psychological environments give children the sense of security that derives from feeling welcome and valued, and at the same time guarantees the opportunity for developing all their cognitive and relational potentials.

Most of all, early care and education programs are living spaces that are continuously characterized and modified by events and stories that are both individual to the child and part of the collective social culture of the school.

We need to examine how children's spaces accept and support both the *I* and the *we,* the small group and the large group, and the individual memory and collective memory. We need to support the possibility of acting and reflecting on one's action, the legibility of the space (i.e. to what extent the space can be read by its inhabitants), transparency but also opacity (where and when the children are permitted to remove themselves from adult supervision and their privacy is respected), the capacity of the spaces to stimulate curiosity, actions and gestures, manipulative and constructive skills, and their communicative effectiveness.

The school is first of all a relational system where the child and the children are formally initiated into the organized cultural forms of this place and where children have the opportunity to create culture. The event, the creative act, becomes more possible to achieve when this educational creativity involves not only the children but also the adults — teachers and parents.

The Image of Learning

Relation, interaction, and intersubjectivity enable the creation of new actions, thoughts, theories, languages, and values for the subject and for the community. This is perhaps one of the strongest meanings that we attribute to the idea of education itself.

Education is creation, a common construction of meanings; school is an edu-cating place where the child enters in his wholeness, with his body, his emotions, his history, his knowledge, his doubts, and his curiosity to learn and understand. She participates to understand herself and the world, along with the others and through the others. She participates to understand the present, and while constructing the present, is also constructing the future, the new "constructing time." Time is the right of children as well as adults.

There are many implications of this for the educational context because constructing something new means to be open to doubt, uncertainty, and to what is possible. To educate is a verb that is conjugated in the future, implying an ongoing process that involves everyone — children and adults. In education it is easy to confuse that which is given and that which is received. The paths and the borderlines are less evident because they interweave and then dissolve to give way to new identities. Education thus becomes a common construction of meanings and values, because where there is education there is reciprocity.

The school is one of the places of education, but not the only one. Education occurs only if it is offered as a context where the subject (I like to say again, the child, but also teachers and parents) enters in his wholeness, and not only for the purpose of cognitive development but to encounter other subjects, other stories, other values. To encounter differences, in relation to which the individual's own knowledge and identity are constructed. It is in the comparison of ideas, in exchange, action, discussion, and negotiation that we construct not only our own knowledge but our identity and the identities of the others, and of the world.

It is now clear: the age-old question confronted by generations of philosophers

of *whether the human being is a product of nature or a product of the culture, of the genes or of the environment* (nature vs. nurture) no longer interests Reggio's educators.

We think it is important to understand the interconnection, the infinite ways in which nature and nurture interact, and whether there are favorable situations for this interaction, this *dance of life*. We think there is a biological-cultural co-adaptation between the biological nature and identity of the child and the society. Society's members are sensitive and competent in responding to the child's behavior and in

The Pedagogy of Listening

Listening is being open to differences, to the value of different points of view and of the interpretations of the others.

Listening is an active verb, which interprets the message by giving it meaning and giving value to the one who transmits it.

Listening takes the subject out of anonymity, legitimates him, gives him visibility, enriching both the listener and the producer of the message.

Listening is a prerequisite of any teaching that is based on real learning. Learning is decided on by the *learning subject* and takes shape in his mind through action and reflection. Learning becomes knowledge and skill through representation and exchange.

Listening, then, is an *overall context of listening*, where the subject feels legitimized in representing his theories and interpretations. Through this process, the subject *re-knows* his knowledge, enabling his images and intuitions to take shape and evolve through action, emotion, expressivity, and representational symbols.

attributing a sense to it — just as the child, right from birth, is open to and competent in seeking and grasping this sense.

It follows that the *socialization of young children*, seen as the child's entry into a society, with its rules and codes, should not be interpreted as a process geared toward *making a child social*, or rather making a child a *social being*. Rather, it is a process, starting from the child's social openness and competence, geared toward making him a member of a certain social system, which has its own languages, code, and rules. A member who is conscious and active in this system is creative and capable of orienting himself within the codes, using them to create new languages and new realities. The difficult task of education is helping children *know the rules* and *acknowledge the rules*, while at the same time keeping alive that ability to question rules and regulations that is part of childhood and of any creative act.

An Image of Knowledge

- How do we learn?
- How does a child learn?
- How do children come to understand the world and themselves?

When a child represents to others his mental images, he is also representing them to himself, becoming more highly aware of them. By passing from one language to another, from one field of experience to another, the child modifies and enriches his own theories and conceptual maps. But this is true if, and only if, the child has the possibility to make these passages, these transitions, in a group context, i.e. in the group and with the others. As a child's ideas, languages, theories, and conceptual maps bump up against other children's ideas, languages, theories, and conceptual maps, the result is learning.

This belief in the co-construction of knowledge requires both children and teachers to be active researchers.

The task of the educator is not only to recognize and welcome differences, but also to make it possible for unique differences to be nurtured through comparison and exchange. This is true not only for differences between children, but also differences between languages children use to express differences. Passage from one language to another enables the creation and consolidation of concepts and conceptual maps, both for individual children and for children within a group. It is comparison and dialogue that generate understanding and awareness. Not only do we represent the world in our mind, but this representation is the result of our sensitivity to the way in which the world is interpreted in the minds and representations of others. Starting from this sensitivity, we form and communicate our representation of the world not only on the basis of our response to events (self-construction) but also on the basis of what we learn about the world through our communicative exchange with others.

The capacity to make transitions, from one intelligence to another or from one language to another, is not only a potential within the mind of each individual, but is also a tendency to transit (and interact) among multiple minds. We enrich our knowledge and our subjectivity thanks to this openness to the representations and theories of the others, which is substantially being open to the others.

Communication and dialogue is a quality of the mind and the intelligence which is present in young child. It is a quality that demands to be listened to and sustained.

This *context of multiple listening*, on the part of the teacher, the children, and the individual who can listen to others and listen to himself, overturns the traditional teaching-learning relationship, shifting

the central focus onto learning, or better onto the self-learning that is created by the individual and the group. It is not just the individual child who learns how to learn, but the group itself becomes aware of its role as a *place of teaching*. In groups languages are enriched, multiplied, refined, generated, clash, contaminate each other and become hybrid, and are renewed.

The concept of *scaffolding*, as well, assumes different meanings and modes. The network of reciprocal expectations sustains the individual and group processes. In this context, the teacher, in addition to her role of support and cultural mediation (thematic and instrumental offerings, etc.), observes, documents, and interprets the processes that take place autonomously among the children. When teachers support children's construction of knowledge with documentation, they recognize the potential of learning how to teach.

Documentation offers the group and each individual child the possibility to see themselves from another point of view while they are learning (both during the process and afterward). Rich documentation:

- makes visible, in part, and thus in a *partial* way, the nature of the cognitive processes and learning strategies used by each child, and makes the subjective and intersubjective processes a common heritage;
- enables reading, revisiting, and evaluation in time and space;
- is essential for metacognitive processes and understanding.

Understanding, however, takes place not only when concepts are passed from one disciplinary area or language to another, but also through reflection on the quality of these transitions and on the deepening of a concept within a particular sphere.

Through documentation, the learner is not only the protagonist but also the commentator of his learning. He can describe how he is learning and how the others are learning.

Documentation also helps the teacher and the group of teachers to understand how the children learn. Through this understanding teachers develop their own hypotheses on *teaching*, the creation of new contexts, problems, and instruments, that can be offered to the children's own knowledge-building processes. The teacher, in short, can learn how to teach, to make hypotheses and conjectures, and to advance proposals to discuss with the children in harmony with their learning processes.

We deeply believe in the value of subjectivity in education. This premise is of crucial importance not only on the cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical levels, but also on the political and cultural levels. We believe that this issue is fundamental for the future of our own humanity — the relationship between one individual and another is a key issue for the future of all of us. To decide whether my self-identity is constructed independently of the others or with the others, means to choose between images of humans and humanity.