

using our experiences with infants to tell the stories of their capabilities

by Lauren Shaffer

Entering the infant room

I am a teacher at Boulder Journey School. For the past 12 years, the faculty of our school has been engaged in a study of the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy. By studying these inspiring schools, we find hope for our profession. Early childhood teachers in Reggio Emilia and other northern Italian cities carry a strong image of children and teachers, and are strongly supported by their communities. As an individual, my experience at Boulder Journey School has taught me to cultivate my sense of respect for children and parents. I have learned to view each child as capable, and to view myself as a



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professional who is capable of facilitating the multitude of complex experiences that shape young children's understandings of the human and physical world.

In the fall of 2007, I entered the infant room for the first time as a teacher after several years with preschool and toddler-aged children. I was prepared for new experiences, nervous and excited at the same time about all I would encounter. I asked myself many questions as I formed expectations:

- Would I like the infant room?
- Would it be too quiet without verbal children?
- How could I, as their teacher, provide them with the highest quality learning experiences while at the same time focusing on caregiving routines?

My expectations were surpassed and my anxieties soothed as I witnessed exactly how amazing it is to watch infants develop. What I didn't expect was that a different source of anxiety would come from my interactions with adults in life outside of my classroom and school. I was unprepared for how often I would be asked to explain my chosen and treasured career path.

What does an infant teacher do?

In everyone's social life, casual conversations almost always turn at some point to the question, "So, what do you do?" Telling someone that you are an infant teacher is an interesting experience. The casual conversations quickly turn into raised eyebrows and the inevitable question, "Well, what do you teach an infant?"

This is a difficult question for early childhood professionals. Often, we shy away from answering it at all. We could call ourselves child care workers or caregivers, but those terms don't necessarily represent the entirety of what we actually do. As teachers of very young children, we are the firsthand witnesses of the connections they make and the knowledge they build by exploring and engaging with their surroundings. Each time I am asked this question, I am forced to think deeply about my job, and it has provided me with a solid concept of what it is and why it is important. Having this conversation is the means to communicate to people just how significant the infant year is, and how important it is to have knowledgeable professionals in the role of educator.

What can you teach infants?

According to our country's traditions, the formal school experience begins with kindergarten. Kindergarten takes different forms in different places, but most people remember it as a time when concrete foundations are laid for learning the core subject areas: reading, writing, math, and science. In general, infants are sent to school for a very different reason: their need for care while their parents work.

Let's compare the kind of knowledge a kindergartner gains in school to the kind of knowledge an infant gains. When asked to explain what you teach to a kindergartner, educators can respond, "I teach them to read." People are comfortable with the idea of literacy education. We remember being taught to read, and reading is a skill that remains salient throughout our lives. Few people remember, however, what they learned as infants. Take, for example, the processes inherent in socialization. Recent brain research tells us that very young infants are capable of complex emotions such as jealousy and empathy, can discriminate between minute details in faces and facial expressions, and intentionally experiment with many different sounds, gauging adult reactions in an effort to be understood (Wingert et al., 2005).

These are all critical social skills, and we continue to learn about social interaction throughout our lives. Such concepts have no defined beginning or end. Thus, unlike reading, it is hard to understand what would be meant by saying, "I teach infants to socialize." It's easy to envision a 'reading lesson,' but it doesn't make sense to envision a 'socialization lesson.'

Rather than using words, infants speak to us in other ways. They tell us their preferences by reaching for objects or pointing their fingers (Blake et al., 2005), or through the direction and duration of

their gazes (Hespos & Spelke, 2004), and their smiles (Messinger & Fogel, 1998). Communicating nonverbally is a part of an infant teacher's life. This is why it is so hard to explain to others who are so rooted in a verbal existence. We intuitively learn to speak the nonverbal languages of the children with whom we interact, and we support them in finding many new languages with which to communicate with each other and adults.

Teaching children of all ages

Many people understand a teacher to be a 'provider of information.' An image is conjured of a teacher standing in front of a class with a book, speaking to children as they listen or take notes. But that is not what we are doing when we help infants learn. If you change the definition of teaching from 'providing information,' to 'facilitating learning,' an infant teacher's role suddenly becomes a bit more tangible. Instead of talking about what information we provide to infants, we are now talking about what and how infants learn, and it becomes much easier to explain the professional's role in that learning.

Infants are experiencing everything in their world for the very first time. They are natural detectives and scientists. They question, observe, hypothesize, investigate, and define. So what is it that the facilitator of infant learning does? First, consider the archetypal 'information provider.' She plans lessons, presents the lessons, and then evaluates students' learning. What does the early childhood teacher do? She plans too, based on previous knowledge built by establishing relationships with the children. However, rather than presenting verbal or visual information to children, she plans carefully thought-out situations. As the children encounter these situations, they build knowledge while the teachers observe and interact with them.

Teachers use their observations to evaluate children based on strategies they use

to explore, theories they build, and goals they are working toward. Infant teachers do not present information in a didactic way. They gather information about what infants want to, or are ready to explore, and then present materials and situations accordingly to facilitate learning.

The care and education of children

There are many different types of programs for infant care and education. Many different philosophies and curriculums are followed, but most follow a version of the process described above. In addition, caregiving routines are woven throughout the infant teacher's day.

We can see that the workload of an infant teacher can be quite similar to an elementary school teacher. So why is there a difference in people's understanding of this professional role? Infants are learning things that are key to their development. That is what formal reading foundations are to the kindergartner. Would an infant learn to socialize without the influence of a teacher? Perhaps. Would a kindergartner learn to read without the influence of a teacher? Perhaps. Are the experiences of socialization and reading enhanced by the nurturing involvement of an experienced and knowledgeable professional? Certainly!

I do not teach children to read or to do math problems. However, I study child development, spend time planning, and try to provide the best possible experiences to children based on my knowledge of each of them. I present them with experiences that help lay solid foundations for literacy and math skills, in addition to identity and social development. I don't define myself as a caregiver, although caregiving is a vital part of my professional experience. I am an educator.



Photo 1: Cassidy crinkles the cellophane with her hands. Abby watches and listens. Abby's eyes stay focused on Cassidy's hands, which is the spot from where the sound is coming. As teachers, we observe these children honing their listening abilities. We watch as they discover that they have the capability to use their bodies to manipulate materials in order to produce sounds. Consequently, they also begin to form opinions about sounds. We use their observed interest in the sounds of cellophane as a basis to plan encounters with various other materials. For example, we wonder how they would react if we offered papers that have similar tactile properties, but offer different auditory properties.



Photo 2: Giovanna discovers new metal rods strung onto a wire. She crawls over, braces herself, and reaches out to them. They chime. She sits back and smiles. She reaches again. Again, they chime. She smiles once again. She reaches out and grabs hold of them. They do not chime. She shakes her hand, wondering if this will make them chime. It does not. She lets go. They chime. She smiles. Many variations later, Giovanna has learned the strategies to make the most pleasing sounds with the chimes.



Photo 3: Mac stands and trumpets his voice through the funnel. Akari listens, then picks up the funnel next to her and begins to imitate Mac's vocal sounds. As teachers, we recognize that these children are discovering possibilities for their voices, communicating with each other, and learning about the effect an object can have on the sound of their voice. We wonder what other materials we can offer that might produce different vocal effects. These might include a variety of straight tubes to magnify the children's voices in different ways, or tubes that are closed on one end to muffle them.



Photo 4: Midway through our year together, teachers noticed the children using their fingers to scratch to produce sounds on textured surfaces. We wondered if they might be interested in exploring plucking instruments. When we introduced this small harp, we not only observed them using the same hand motions to pluck the strings, we also noticed them going back to the textured items which caused them to explore this motion in the first place, comparing the sounds of the surfaces and the strings side-by-side.

Photo 5: When David began to string the guitar, Mac crawled over and observed. He not only watched, but also touched the strings, plucked them, pulled on them, and shook them. When the stringing process was complete, much to Mac's delight, each string produced a deep, resonating sound when he tapped or plucked it. The strings were no longer loose enough to pull on or shake, they were tight, and made a new, beautiful sound. We wonder what this experience has taught Mac about the potential of strings for making sounds.



The power of story

Throughout my journey, I have found the most powerful way to answer the question is through story. When I speak about my encounters with specific children, I watch raised eyebrows turn into looks of understanding and curiosity. During my first year, my co-teachers and I engaged in several captivating investigations with the infants in our care, one of which was an investigation of sound and music. By considering the accompanying photos, you can hear as this group of infants tells you some of their stories.

My hope is that these children's stories will inspire you to share your children's stories. We, who learn alongside infants, have the opportunity to be the greatest of advocates for both our position as professionals and for the capabilities of infants. I offer one piece of advice: don't be confined by other people's understanding. Share your own, in the spirit that each person you inspire brings our field a small step closer to the respect for children and teachers that we deserve.

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