LG.: How does the relationship between the infant-toddler center and the home develop over time?

C.: The parents’ first contact is with the registration office of the Municipal Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools. The parents fill out the registration form with the administrative staff. Later, the selection is made according to established criteria that are used for every family that applies. The families are notified of their acceptance through a public posting. Once the child has been accepted, the infant-toddler center invites the parents and the child to visit while the children are there so that they can see the infant-toddler center when it is lived by the children.

That is the first encounter the families have with the nido. In the month of August, there is a meeting of the group of children and parents that will be coming to the nido in September. This meeting is organized by the educators of the infant-toddler center, by the pedagogista [education coordinator] and is the first moment of knowing each among children, among families with the teachers and with the environment of the infant-toddler center, there are individual meetings with the families. These conferences are organized in order to establish a dialogue for reciprocal sharing
between parent and teachers of a particular child. Parents share information about the preferences, desires and habits of their child in the course of daily life. Besides learning about the children, the teachers want to introduce the parents to the organization of the infant-toddler center in order to help them to feel at home there. This is a very important moment because it is the first time that teachers and families can have a true dialogue and begin their common history.

Before the beginning of the school year, there is also a meeting of the parents and teachers of each classroom. In this meeting, parents and teachers decide the organization and the plan for the transition into the infant-toddler center. At this time, we also try to work out some strategies and the teachers try to understand the parents’ thinking and expectations about this first beginning at the infant-toddler center. We try to bring the thoughts, desires and complexities of the parents inside the infant-toddler center.

This series of meetings is a way of organizing, thinking and predicting together how the first mornings will be shared and also a way to explore how the parents can be present in the infant-toddler center from the very beginning. We require the presence of one of the parents during their child’s first few days at the infant-toddler center. We also ask the parents to offer their suggestions and strategies concerning their behavior with their child during the first days in order to allow the child to have the possibility to
get to know the other children, the teachers and the space of the infant-toddler center. In these first meetings, we also try to organize all families into small groups of families who will start at the infant-toddler center at different times. So, small groups of children and small groups of parents begin together. A small group of children and parents begins the first of September and then, after a few days, another small group begins. The first group of children and parents have already been in some way, familiar with the infant-toddler center and have a little bit more experience and, therefore, can help the second group.

The strategy of entering into the infant-toddler center at the beginning of a new school year helps children, teachers, and parents to construct a context of relationships that continues to grow. Meetings throughout the year are not occasional or casual. The clear intention of these meetings is to establish continuity and consolidation of relationships.

Daily communication is a very important tool for knowing each other. This communication develops through encounters that occur every day between teachers and parents. We want to create a relationship of knowing each other, trusting each other, comparing notes and exchanging ideas. We want to build a relationship of participation and belonging that develops over time.

During the families’ very first days at the infant-toddler center, the transition or inserimento, we, as
teachers, want to create a truly welcoming environment within each classroom and throughout the infant-toddler center. We want to communicate a sense that children and parents are welcome, expected and considered important. We ask the parents to be present with the children at the beginning because this very first transition needs to be supported by them. We want this first beginning to be shared by parents, children and teachers together so that we can better support the children in this very important moment when new relationships are formed at the infant-toddler center. The transition in small groups of children and families has to be a strategy that creates a sense of communication and reciprocal knowing among children and adults and among adults. So teachers and parents together will construct this sense of belonging and trust.

LG.: Do you have particular strategies to get to know the children at the beginning?

CB.: I think it is very important for teachers to listen to children from the beginning and not only in terms of verbal language because many of these children have not developed their verbal language very much. It is important to listen carefully and observe what the children are communicating to us through many languages such as gesture, facial expression or other signals that may show curiosity, interest or well-being. Together we also have to share and understand signals like crying and other moments of difficulty. The importance of
listening and observing is connected with the spirit of transition which can be defined with a precise beginning and a precise end. It is a period in which there are pauses, times when we try something, then adjust the situation while continually involving the parents and their thoughts. For example, do the parents think it is time that the children say good-bye to them? Should we take more time today rather than the day before? All these things are particular to each child. So the individuality and subjectivity of children are very important as are the kinds of relationships that the children have and their ability to create a network of relationships. Are these children accustomed to having other relationships?

LG.: Could you describe an experience of inserimento or transition that has particularly touched you or you think could be helpful for colleagues in the United States?

CB.: I will tell a story about two children who began their experience at the Peter Pas Infant-Toddler Center when they were 24 months old. One of the children, Mattia, came to the infant-toddler center for the first few days with his mother. Then the teachers agreed and Mattia’s mother agreed that it was time to say good-bye to him. So one morning, after spending a little time with him she said good-bye and Mattia didn’t like that too much. He was not happy. He preferred to stay by himself. He didn’t want us, as teachers, to come close to
him. We tried to talk to him and to take him in our arms but, but at the same we understood that we had to respect his own time and let him decide when he was ready to be close to us or to accept our coming close to him.

Another child in the class, Francesca, had already overcome the moment of saying good-bye to her mother. She was really quite happy and didn’t mind when her mother left. She was serene when she said good-bye to her. We noticed that Francesca has observed Mattia and she understood how delicate the moment was for him and how fragile he was. So one of these mornings, Francesca, seeing Mattia crying went close to him. To our surprise, he let her come close to him. Francesca sat next to Mattia and, with an attitude of great participation and solidarity, said, “Come on, Mattia, don’t cry! You will see your mommy will come back. You will see that she will come very soon.” And then we saw that Mattia accepted this moment and he really liked having Francesca next to him. He knew that Francesca had overcome this difficulty of saying goodbye to her mother. So this beginning of a friendship and Mattia’s acceptance of Francesca’s message helped him overcome his sense of sadness. So, in a sense, it was Francesca who made his transition possible. He accepted her more than we adults and more than the strategies we had tried. Of course, we were close to him all this time and he probably felt that.

But it’s also true that, from an early age, children seem
to be able to have great solidarity, great attention to each other and the ability to listen to each other. Therefore, on the part of the teachers, there was a great deal of welcoming and support for both children but also an appreciation for what Francesca was offering us.

LG.: The environment of the infant-toddler center offers messages that both children and adults can “read.” What are the aspects of the space to which you pay particular attention? According to your experience, which are the aspects that tend to make parents feel accepted to be part of the experience? In the space of an infant-toddler center, how can one reflect and respect the uniqueness of every child and, at the same, time give value to the small community that groups of children and adults form together?

CB.: I think it is essential for the space of the infant-toddler center to transmit a sense of expectation and welcoming to parents and children. This space should communicate and we, as teachers, have to think very carefully about this. We want to create communication so the relationships that are beginning will continue. Spaces can truly give this sense of continuity through communication and welcoming.

For example, the entryway of the infant-toddler center is very important for communicating messages. But also, the entryway of each room should offer to parents who enter with the children something that gives ideas about what the
teachers and children are doing. They should find their own children there through, perhaps, the journals of the teachers. They should also find information and images of what is happening inside the room and how the group is forming. A journal prepared by the teachers should communicate a sort of panoramic view of what is happening, the changes that are taking place in that room or section.

I'm thinking about the visual documentation that can communicate micro-stories or narratives about what happens among the children. Narratives can also be done visually, capturing looks, gestures and interaction among the children. I'm also thinking about spaces and places that are capable of being transparent and transmitting what is happening when the parents are not there. I'm thinking of about a place where parents themselves feel accepted and welcome physically. For example, a place where parents can stop and sit and be together, to talk with the teachers and also with other parents that come into the infant-toddler center. This is a way for them to be sharing impressions and reflections with each other. I'm thinking about the value of a place where the children can find their photograph together with the photograph of other children. This communication on the wall enables adults and children to see visual images of the children in relationships with others from the beginning.

Other spaces, other places can give this message of welcoming. I'm thinking now about the personal drawers of
toddlers and infants where children, parents or teachers can put things brought from home, for example. Things that come inside the infant-toddler center increase the network of relationships because these objects help to form a connection between the life of the children in the infant-toddler center and at home. These drawers are usually personalized by placing photographs or symbols that the children can recognize. This is important for the children’s identity. They also recognize the other with whom they can share the space. So the child becomes a subject in the relationship. The child recognizes his or her subjectivity.

I’m also thinking about the places inside the different rooms to welcome what the children have brought from their vacations...little treasures they have collected that they can share with their friends and teachers. These treasures help each child recognize himself or herself as a unique person but also as belonging to a group of friends.

The calendar with the birthdays encourages the children to appreciate their own uniqueness and the relationship that they have with others. We also create folders that collect individual folders that collect individual drawings and work of the children that can be shared with the others and with the parents. So we try to create a space that welcomes individual differences and uniqueness, but also construct this sense of relationship among children, with adults and with the environment of the infant-toddler center itself.
LG.: Curiosity, active participation, the pleasure to play and to express oneself lead children to interact with the space and, therefore, to influence the very space that teachers have prepared for them. Could you describe some situations in which you observed infants and toddler directly and indirectly modifying the space of the infant-toddler center?

CB.: I think the value of space and environment, in a broader sense, is that one cannot consider it as fixed and set forever but within a process of change and growth. Therefore, the space is ready to change in relationship with the subject, the children who live in the space. Here is an example of an experience with the children between 18 and 24 months. We had a space in the classroom that the teachers intended for symbolic play with dolls. We soon noticed how the children in that classroom where particularly interested in the space that was devoted to construction with building blocks and other materials. We reflected about the children’s interest with other teachers and with the parents of those children. As a result, we decided to widen the space that had been devoted to building and called the Construction Space. The classroom changed its appearance completely. The symbolic play area became the additional space for building. The parents started to bring material to school plastic tubing, pieces of wood, cardboard tubing of various dimensions. The classroom changed because of the children who inhabited that space.

Another example has to do with children between 24 and 32
months. A space which had been set up for symbolic play in the kitchen soon helped us to encourage the children’s great interest in numbers. Some children had noticed the number of the trolley that they took to the infant-toddler center. Some of the mothers told us that the children were interested in the number of the house where they lived. After a dialogue with the parents, the teachers learned that many of the children were interested in numbers.

So we made the decision to reorganize the space for kitchen play another way. After discussing this with the children, we decided to call the space the Office. Parents brought in a typewriter and an adding machine. Then we added numbers and letters the children cut out of newspaper. The space should be flexible and ready to be changed. We can see that the space becomes more alive when we follow the interests of the children and new ideas that the class suggests. Then we can see that the space follows the process of growth of the children throughout the year.

LG.: Could you share some of your reflections and experiences regarding the capacity of very young children to enter into relationships with their peers? In your view, how can adults facilitate and support these exchanges as well as the emergence of friendships?

CB.: This is a very important question, Lella. Once again, it is essential that adults listen to children. In my view, it is particularly important for the adults to know how to listen
to all languages of the children in the infant-toddler center because their verbal language is not well developed. It is difficult for infants and toddlers to declare their pleasure, their readiness to enter a relationship and their desires without words. We, as adults, should be able to understand the desires, readiness and capacity of these very young children to enter a relationship with others even when verbal declarations are not made. Their gestures, their look, the solidarity and the collaboration that emerge among children communicates this to us.

Sometimes the provocation, the conflicts that emerge during these relationships declare to us, as adults, how strong is the desire on the part of the children to enter into relationships with others. The role of the adults, the teachers, is to be aware of the great power and potential capacities of children in this regard. When the adults are truly convinced of this potential and capacity, then this way of listening, this desire to be very attentive becomes part of their way of being with children. As a result, the adults acquire a stronger capacity to recognize all types of languages as strategies for building relationships.

After recognizing and supporting these languages, it’s important to consider the value of the great skills of children and to render them visible through documentation of the moments that the children have with each other. The adult has to be able to capture these important moments, being
present and involved in the relationship yet not evading or accelerating the time that the children need. The adult must be able to give the time to the children to live through a relationship. If we reflect on this, this time is often very different from the value of time that we, as adults, give to moments like this. The adult who is within or inside the situation is able to capture these moments. This adult will be able to witness this great capacity and potential that children have even when they are very young.

LG.: Considering the many languages that generates actions, thoughts, feelings and images among children, what suggestions do you have for teachers who would like to begin to construct gradual and meaningful experiences for infants and toddlers? Educators in the United States often ask the following question: “Is it possible for infants to be involved in a project? How does one define a project for children under 3 years of age? Could you tell us about some of your experiences?

CB.: I think it is essential that teachers have the capacity to recognize happenings in the infant toddler center as events that can have the potential for children to live through. Here is an example: Alessandro, who was 22 months old. Brought to the infant-toddler center some sea urchins he had found on the seaside. He wanted to share and experiment with them with his friends. I think that was a truly important occasion for the small group of children because it gave shape and voice to
their curiosity, their questions and their experimentation about sea urchin. This was a very rich moment for all the children of the classroom.

The teachers wondered how they could support the children’s curiosity. Together with our other colleagues, we thought to offer the children some magnifying lenses so the children could see more closely and look inside the sea urchin. We also decided to place some mirrors of different dimensions on the table to change the points of view and to look at the sea urchins from different sides. In a sense, we were rendering the situation more complex. When it was placed on the mirror, the sea urchin was indicating the multiple aspects of its own image to the children. We teachers experimented together about a graphic language that small children could use to interpret the sea urchin. We realized that we were documenting this happening and that it had become a small project with the children who had started to question and investigate.

In any case, the sea urchin had given them more questions and we had found reciprocal answers together. So each child was experiencing a personal process of self-learning in a situation that had been created by one of the children, then supported and stimulated by the teachers. The teachers had thought about situations in a context that could support the children and also give them the possibility to go on with their investigation and to modify the situation that they
created in the beginning.

A project could also be proposed by the teachers but the teachers still have to let the children find personal strategies to adopt within their own investigation or research. Once again, wire, clay and drawing materials can become a way for the children to express their thoughts and give voice to their gestures and mental images. The questions and the personal paths of the children become a project in the moment the adult is capable of entering and staying within this game of making suggestions and proposals, having expectations about the path to take, then revisiting and interpreting the children’s personal paths with other teachers. The teacher himself or herself has to be playing the same kind of games that the children play when he or she gives them the possibility to re-visit, progress, and have a process within a personal investigation. So teachers should compare notes with other teachers, with atelieristi (studio coordinators), with the pedagogisti (education coordinator) in order to put into a network all that can be done to support the children in their personal research.

Materials are truly important in the moment they become a language, which is owned by the children and not just a technique that has to be learned or used in only one way. Materials should become languages to give voice to what children have as their thoughts, as mental images, as possibilities to enter into relationships with the other
children. Through materials, children have a chance to collaborate, cooperate and exchange knowledge among each other. These are the kinds of questions that adults should discuss among themselves in order to try to observe, document and understand what the children construct or bring forward in an autonomous, personal way.

LG.: How do you organize a work meeting with the families in order to support their initiatives and decisions? Could you tell us about some experiences?

CB.: At Peter Pan Infant-Toddler Center, the teachers and parents decided to research the possible places children could go with their parents after leaving the infant-toddler center each day. This work originated from a suggestion from the parent-teacher committees that are active in all the city preschools and infant-toddler centers. Other municipal preschools and infant-toddler centers became involved in a similar project. At Peter Pan we collected data through a questionnaire with the parents. From this data, the teachers and the parents created a map of the city marked with all the places in the city where children, teachers and parents could spend time. It was a very large project and the teachers began to feel more a part of the life of the family outside the infant-toddler center because this proposal was the result of some thinking that had been going in several of the municipal centers.

Once again, it is important to give value to teachers
researching with the parents, not just asking them to do something. This research was a shared work that was based on a true need of families and also respected the system of the infant-toddler center which is based on three protagonists: teachers, parents and children.

LG.: In what ways is the neighborhood around the infant-toddler center involved in the life of the center? How does the community participate in the activities of the infant-toddler center?

CB.: The life of the infant-toddler centers and the preschools is immersed within the life of the city and the citizens. Citizens in Reggio Emilia can be a part of the parent-teacher committees even if they’re not parents. Grandparents or otherwise related to children attend an infant-toddler center or preschool. Citizens can enter into the life of the school and can participate in discussions about any issue that is relevant for the parent-teacher committee to consider.

One of the possibilities for citizens who want to participate in the initiatives of the infant-toddler centers and preschools is an event called “Open Courtyards.” A few years ago, we began to open up our playgrounds, gardens, parks and courtyards in the spring or summer, just before the closing of the schools for the year. This initiative creates a shared space outside the preschools and infant-toddler centers where there is shared participation in performances, celebrations and concerts. Each preschool and infant toddler
center plan how they can initiate and support such an event involving various aspects of the life of the city and inviting any interested citizen to participate.

LG.: Could you describe how you think about, organize and live through the transition between the infant-toddler center and preschool? How do the children and parent experience this transition?

CB.: The transition between the infant-toddler center and the preschool is very important. The experience of the Reggio Municipal Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools is for children from birth to 6 years of age. Our philosophy considers this age group as one, not two separate periods of a child’s life. In our program, children who are 2 ½ to 3 years of age have occasions to visit their future preschool. At this time, they have the possibility to encounter the new environment and their future teachers. It is not likely that the entire group of children from one section of an infant-toddler center will go to the same preschool. It is more common that small groups of children go together to the same preschool.

The teachers in the infant-toddler center and the preschool have meetings and exchanges about the children who are making the passage to the preschool. These dialogues are consistent with the philosophy of continuing the life and the experiences of the children in the infant-toddler center. This kind of communication considers how the children have
lived through the experience, not as a step that is concluded, but rather as something that has continuity. Parents have meetings with the teachers of the preschool in order to establish a dialogue, get to know each other and begin a process that they will build together. We believe and hope that what we propose is a continuity of philosophy...a strong image of the child that cannot be fragmented in age levels but has a long-range view and is capable of welcoming each child’s differences and variety of experiences and culture.

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