

“The Experience of the Infant-Toddler Center in Reggio Emilia and Its Context

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Maddalena Tedeschi, *Pedagogista said:*

In Reggio Emilia, new infant-toddler centers have contributed through time to construct true educational systems that continue to experiment with space and environments. They are communities made of groups of children with educators in permanent professional development and parents as participants. There has been a constant attitude in our work of research about and with children and today we are considering the youngest children. How to speak to children who do not speak yet? How to "read" children's actions and choices at this young age? I'd like to share with you an experience that contributed to the evolution of our knowledge of infants and toddlers.

The documentation of the story of Laura narrated directly by her teacher Eluccia Forghieri (Edwards and Rinaldi, 2009) and the story we call "The Right Hand" (Giudici, Rinaldi and Krechevsky, 2001, pp. 34-37), has helped the teachers to grow and to understand that children need time and teachers have to give that time. In turn, the teachers also need time to reflect on the documented observations in order to construct interpretations.

The tenacity of children in their research suggests that teachers should also be tenacious. They should be adults capable of researching with a disposition to observe and understand the value of the research that children do. Like the children, a teacher has to be capable of making hypotheses and living new situations as situations of research where one should respectfully make many attempts and explore many possibilities.

The documentation of these stories gives value to the image of the child and to the adult as researchers. This research gives credit to the concept of a competent child rather than a child that has to develop through particular stages...a child connected to action, capable of making hypotheses...we could almost say a child capable of formulating scientific thought...a child who has an idea, researches it with tenacity and expects a result. We think of a child who is rich with thoughts and gestures, and also rich with a large choice of possibilities, of sensible relationships with the world.

The empathy that children have in relationship with others – not only with the space and materials – opens up the newest field of research, neurological research on the development of the brain. It tells us that young children have a complex system of neurons, and that they are biologically gifted toward creating relations and empathy with others, understanding of others even without the use of words. Children understand each other when intentions are expressed with minimal gestures. These are rich relationships with learning constructed with others. We are very attentive to interactions and the culture constructed among children.

If we consider a day in the *nido* (Infant Toddler Center) and a day in the preschool. I think it is very evident that some things are very different, visibly different and yet how various aspects of life have a strong sense of continuity from one place to the other. So the day in the preschool and in the *nido* is a weaving of the fabric of relationship. I think the vital thing in a day in the *nido* and in the preschool is managing to maintain the pleasure and the tension toward learning, emotion, curiosity and research.

Behind all of this work with the children, there is a strong foundation of work by adult, which may not be visible. That is the thinking connected to what we call *progettazione*, the process in which we try to hold together various elements: the first is the organization of the day, the second is the construction of a day that has a sense of development and evolution, and the third element can be defined as uncertainty that

comes from a sense of improvising connected with the encounter between the work and intentions the adults bring and the proposals the children bring into the school each day.

How is it possible to hold together all these different souls that present themselves in a day and also put together the construction of a group of children and adults working together? I use the word "soul" purposefully because there are some things that we can plan together, some elements of our day that are very concrete and practical. We can talk together, as adults, about the times we think are necessary for things. We can talk together about the co-presence of teachers, which teachers work together and how they will use their time during the day. We can discuss together beforehand the use of spaces in our Infant/toddler centers and schools. . This involves making observations about contexts and situations, and then thinking of possible re-launches in a future time, based on what has been observed.

I'd like for us to try to go within a group in the Infant /toddler center of what is perhaps most delicate age group of children, the very smallest, and look at what is happening in September when their life in the school. I'd like to look at some situations and stop to think about what is happening. Perhaps together, we could do a kind of exercise in *progettazione*. We will look at a small portion of a day in the infant /toddler center and try to recognize the dynamics we're seeing in the contexts of the relationships taking place. Remember that relationships take place between children, between adults and children, between children and the space, between adults and the space, and between children and adults and the space. The space is one part of the relationship. Then on the basis of what we observe of the relationships, we can try to think of ways of reinforcing the relationships.

How at the beginning of the year are the children going to meet each other in ways that are significant for each one of them?

Silvia, Teacher, Infant/toddler Rodari

I have been a teacher at *Nido* Rodari for the last six years. In this *nido*, there are children from 3 months to 3 years of age. We worked as a group of adults together with a mentor teacher to try to understand the complex situation with infants and toddlers. The mentor teacher inspired us to evolve in the process of considering furnishings, materials, and our thinking and expectations on the basis of documentation. The first clue from a video documentation that made us ask ourselves questions was seeing the children going back to repeatedly look at their photographs. We noticed that the children were using photographs of themselves to try and build up a sense of their own identity, and to connect with the other children who were there..

The teachers decided to introduce a game into our everyday lives that included the use of photographs, when one teacher asks the other teacher, "Who's here today?" This game was played in the large group of 16 children together. It became a way of socializing and a way of giving a beginning to the day. We thought that the game could support what we wanted to see and interpret: the clues of the children. One thing we thought could support interest in this game was the use of mirrors. Photographs and mirrors are two materials that offer two different images of oneself. A photograph, a small portrait, is a de-contextualized image. When you look into a mirror, you are in the here and now, looking at yourself at this moment, in this place. So the sense of context is very different. These two different tools have the potential of creating different perspective and offering different possibilities. Other games that we used together with the mirrors and the photographs were guessing games or riddles, which are also ways of contributing to children's sense of their own identity and other children's identities.

We considered also the role of materials and how they could be used to create connections between children. We, as a group of teachers, decided to use both

informal and formal materials, and also materials that could also be used in symbolic ways by the children.

Another clue we took from observations and documentation related to how much the children use their bodies. Their body languages are informing relationships and communicating. We also noticed that some children were just beginning to use their voices, to form words. We began to hypothesize about how words accompany gestures in these children.

We also considered a clear indication on the part of the children to create contexts that were not just physical but rather, contexts of emotions and affections, and we noticed places where children could begin to weave relationships that would sustain their emotions and affectivity.

There was a force behind our desire to become a connecting factor for these children. The force was the beauty, the loveliness of the individual styles that each child chose, and the strategies that each child used in order to propose herself or himself to the group. We call these styles of communication the children chose for interaction. We saw the children each day trying to establish relationships with the other children and we saw an empathy that the children created and this observation guided our actions more than anything else.

By their very nature, very young children speak with all their bodies; it is the child's entire body that reaches toward an object. If you look very carefully, you see that their feet move a lot when they reach with their hands for an object. Their entire body is involved in the encounter with the object offered to them. Very small children speak with their eyes; we see their desire and curiosity, and their ability to keep in mind many things that happen around them. When they begin to build up their sentences, very often they start by using one word. That means they can make themselves understood with minimal means of communication; they can be extremely essential because they

understand the essence of things. They make enormous efforts to concentrate and focus on the crucial concepts that they will be able to communicate using that one single word. These very small children offer a different way of seeing ; objects in the hands of children very often leave behind their habitual uses and identities, and the children participate very much in making this happen.

References

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