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THE PEDAGOGY OF LISTENING: The Listening Perspective from Reggio Emilia

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Message from the author

I wanted to re-write this article after the terrible attacks in New York and Washington. Instead, I have chosen to offer some initial reflections to preface the article. I strongly feel that the contents of the article take on new values and meanings in the light of the tragedy that devastated all of us. During these days, it has been strongly suggested to listen to children. This word "listening," this concept, seems to have become more acknowledged, shared, and practiced. But this attitude cannot be limited only to this emergency; we have to listen to children not only because we can help them but also because they can help us.

We should listen to the children, so that they can express their fears but also for them to give us the courage to face our fears, for them and with them.

We should listen to the children so that their wisdom gives us comfort, so that their "whys" orient our search for the reasons and give us the strength to find non-violent, honest and responsible answers.

We should listen to the children so that their words give us the courage for the future and help us to find a new way to dialogue with the children and with ourselves.

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Listening is fundamental to the world famous municipal early childhood center for children aged zero to six years. It is the basis for the program's pedagogical approach and for its political approach, which involves a democratic dialogue with the families, the town and culture. This article explores what listening to children means in Reggio Emilia.

The search for meaning

Listening plays an important part in achieving an objective that has always characterized our experience in Reggio: the search for meaning. We understand the school (which, for us, is the early childhood center) as a place that plays an active role in the search for meaning – the meaning of the children and adults as well as their shared meanings. One of the first questions we ask ourselves as educators is: "How can we help children find meaning in what they do, what they encounter, what they experience? And how can we do this for ourselves?" In the search for meaning, we must ask: "why?" "how?" and "what?" These are the key questions that children constantly ask, both in and out of school.

It is a difficult search, especially for children who have so many reference points in their daily lives: family, television, school and the social places they frequent. But we cannot live without meaning; it would preclude any sense of identity, any hope or any future. Children know this; they have the desire and the ability to search for the meaning of life and their own sense of self as soon as they are born. This is why we, in Reggio, view children as active, competent and strong, exploring and finding meaning – not as predetermined, fragile, needy and incapable.

For both adults and children, understanding means being able to develop an interpretive theory, a narrative that gives meaning to the world around them. For us, in Reggio, these theories are extremely important in revealing how children think, question and interpret reality, and their own relationships with reality and with us.

These theories are provisional and can be continuously re-worked. To be useful and to meet our needs, they should offer us satisfactory explanations that are

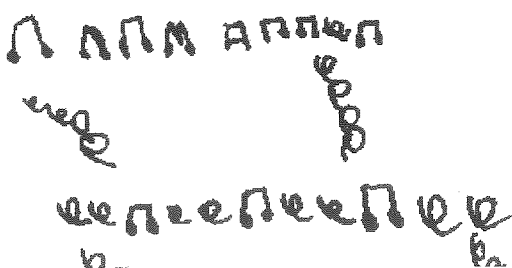
and be attractive to others. They need to be listened to by others. Expressing our theories to others transforms a world which is not intrinsically ours into something shared. Sharing theories is a response to uncertainty. This is the reason why any theory, in order to exist, needs to be expressed, communicated and listened to by others. Herein lies the basis for the "pedagogy of relationships and listening," which distinguishes the work in Reggio Emilia.

The meanings of listening

- Listening should be sensitive to the patterns that connect us to others. Our understanding and our own being are a small part of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.
- Listening should be open and sensitive to the need to listen *and* be listened to, and the need to listen with *all* our senses, not just with our ears.
- Listening should recognize the many languages, symbols and codes that people use in order to express themselves and communicate.
- Listening to ourselves, "internal listening," encourages us to listen to others but, in turn, is generated when others listen to us.
- Listening as time. When you really listen, you get into the time of dialogue and interior reflection, an interior time that is made up of the present but also past and future time and is, therefore, outside chronological time. It is a time full of silences.
- Listening is generated by curiosity, desire, doubt and uncertainty. This is not insecurity but the reassurance that every "truth" is so only if we are aware of its limits and its possible falsification.
- Listening produces questions, not answers.

emotions; it is influenced by the emotions of others; and it stimulates emotions.

- Listening should welcome and be open to differences, recognizing the value of the other's point of view and interpretation.
- Listening is an active verb, which involves giving an interpretation, giving meaning to the message and value to those who are being listened to by others.
- Listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and a suspension of our judgements and prejudices. It requires openness to change. It demands that we value the unknown, and overcome the feelings of emptiness and precariousness that we experience when our certainties are questioned.
- Listening removes the individual from anonymity (and children cannot bear to be anonymous). It legitimizes us and gives us visibility. It enriches both those who listen and those who produce the message.
- Listening is the basis for any learning relationship. Through action and reflection, learning takes shape in the mind of the subject and, through representation and exchange, becomes knowledge and skill.
- Listening takes place within a "listening context," where one learns to listen and narrate, and each individual feels legitimized to represent and offer interpretations of her or his theories through action, emotion, expression and representation, using symbols and images (the "hundred languages"). Understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue.



From the beginning, children demonstrate that they have a voice, know how to listen and want to be listened to by others.

— Carlina Rinaldi

Children as listeners

The capacity for listening and reciprocal expectation is an important quality, enabling communication and dialogue, and demands to be understood and supported. In fact, it abounds in young children, who are the greatest listeners to the world that surrounds them. They listen to life in all its shapes and colors. They listen to others – adults and peers. They quickly perceive how listening is essential for communication.

From the beginning, children demonstrate that they have a voice, know how to listen and want to be listened to by others. Sociability is not taught to children: they are social beings. Young children are strongly attracted by the ways, the languages (and thus the codes) that our culture has produced as well as by other people. Listening, therefore, seems to be an innate predisposition, present from birth, which supports children's process of acculturation.

This is a difficult path that requires energy, hard work and, sometimes, suffering. But it also offers wonder, joy, enthusiasm and passion. It is a path that takes time – time that children have and adults often do not, or do not want to have. This is where the school comes in; it should first and foremost be a "context of multiple listening," involving the teachers and children, individually and as a group, who should listen to each other and themselves. This concept of a context of multiple listening overturns the traditional teaching-learning relationship. The focus shifts to learning – children's self-learning, and the learning achieved by the group of children and adults together.

As children communicate their mental images or theories to others, they also represent them to themselves, developing a more conscious vision. This is what "internal listening" means. By moving from one language to another, and one field of experience to another, and by reflecting on these shifts, children modify and enrich their theories. But this is true if, and only if, children have the opportunity to make these shifts in a group context – with others – and if they have the chance to listen and be listened to by others, to express their differences and be receptive to the differences of the others. The task of those who educate is not only to allow the differences to be expressed, but to make it possible for them to be negotiated and nurtured through exchanging and comparing ideas. In this way, not only does the individual child learn how to learn, but the group becomes conscious of itself as a "teaching place," where the languages are enriched, multiplied, refined and generated but also where they collide and hybridize with each other, and are renewed.

In addition to offering support and mediation to the children, the teacher who knows how to observe, document and interpret these processes will realize his or her own full potential as a learner – in this case, learning how to teach. Documentation can be seen as visible listening: it ensures listening and being listened to by others. This means producing traces – such as notes, slides and videos – to make visible the ways the individuals and the group are learning. This ensures that the group and each child can observe themselves from an external viewpoint

the process.

A broad range of documentation (videos, tape recordings, written notes, etc.):

- makes visible the learning processes and strategies used by each child, though always in a partial and subjective way;
- enables reading, revisiting and assessment- these actions become integral to the knowledge building process;
- seems to be essential for meta-cognitive processes, and for the understanding of children and adults.

Observation, documentation and interpretation are woven together into what I would define as a "spiral movement," in which none of these actions can be separated out from the others. It is impossible, in fact, to document without observing and interpreting. By means of documenting, the thinking or the interpretation of the documenter becomes tangible and capable of being interpreted. The notes, the recordings, the slides and photographs represent fragments of a memory. While each fragment is imbued with the subjectivity of the documenter, it is also subject to the interpretation of others, as part of a collective process of knowledge building. In these fragments lie the past and also the future (i.e., "What else could happen if . . ."). The result is knowledge that is bounteous, co-constructed and enriched by the contributions of many.

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