For an Education Based on Relationships

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(translated by Lella Gandini)

Although (from our experience in Reggio Emilia) we know how strongly children represent the center of our educational system, we continue to be convinced that without attention to the central importance of teachers and families, our view of children is incomplete; therefore, our proposition is to consider a triad at the center of education—children, teachers, and families. To think of a dyad of only a teacher and a child is to create an artificial world that does not reflect reality.

Our goal is to create an amiable school—that is, a school that is active, inventive, livable, documentable, and communicative. Our aim is to make a school that is a place of research, learning, revisiting, reconsideration, and reflection. We strive to create an amiable school where children, teachers, and families feel a sense of well-being; therefore, the organization of the schools—contents, functions, procedures, motivations, and interests—is designed to bring together the three central protagonists—children, teachers, and parents—and to intensify the interrelationships among them.

Anyone who undertakes a project or task thinks about actions that transform existing situations into new, desired ones. In our approach we proceed by making plans, considering options, making cognitive reflections and symbolic representations, and refining communication skills. Active exploration and creative production by educators and children proceed without complete certainty but with a shared representation of the point of destination, the ultimate goal. What is most appreciated all along is the shared sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as individuals and as a group.

What always surprises us is how strategies will be modified along the way—how new methodologies and ways of proceeding will be mirrored in the corresponding activities, strategies, and methodologies used by the children. If gaps and difficulties arise in implementing our design and when participation is of uneven intensity, the system can continue to function. The supportive atmosphere of

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The teacher—who has been observing 11-month-old Lucia as she turns the pages of a catalog—responds to the inquiry of the child, thereby extending her field of exploration; the child then finds further connections. Another teacher documents this event with a camera.

the school by principle is open and democratic, inviting exchange of ideas and suppressing distance between people; thus, in all circumstances, the school maintains its effectiveness and a welcoming feeling to all concerned.

The loneliness, the separation, the indifference, and the violence that more and more characterize modern life undermine our proposal for a system of education based on relationships. For us, however, the difficult social situation is a reason for working even harder at what we do, and as a result the families welcome our efforts to counteract negative influences. On a concrete level this means that we attend with infinite care to a continuously renewed network of communication: preliminary meetings with the families, meetings to define and time the goals and plans of work, and meetings to ensure cooperation and organization of activities and projects.

The theory of education based on relationships as described above contains many of the values that are part of our work: interactive-constructivist views of learning, intensive relations among all participants, the spirit of cooperation, emphasis on research as in-

dividuals and groups, attention to context, consolidation of affections, two-way processes of communication, and finally, acquisition of knowledge about politics (policies and choices) that affect young children. This description presents evidence that we have gone beyond Piagetian views of the child as constructing knowledge from within, almost in isolation.

In summary, our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them only engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical, and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the affective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and, most of all, connected to adults and other children.

The growth of communication networks

Of course, education is not based solely on relationships; however, we consider relationships to be the fundamental, organizing strategy of our educational system. We view relationships not simply as a warm, protective backdrop or blanket but as a coming together of elements interacting dynamically toward a common purpose. The strength of this view of education is in expanding the forms and functions of relationship and interaction. We seek to support social exchanges that better ensure the flow of expectations, activities, cooperation, conflicts, and choices, and we favor discussion of problems that integrate the cognitive, affective, and expressive domains.

Among the goals of our approach is to strengthen each child's sense of identity through recognition by peers and adults.

Ensuring that every child feels a sense of security and belonging within the school enables each child to accept and participate actively in transforming situations that are part of learning experiences. In this way we widen the networks of communication, familiarizing children with different ways of communicating and supporting the actions and exchanges of individuals and the group. As a result children discover that the value of communication is in enhancing the autonomy of individuals and the group. The group becomes self-sustaining, developing its own conversation, its own ways of communicating, acting, and thinking.

The educational approach based on relationship best reveals how a classroom is composed of individual children and subgroups of children with different affinities and abilities. The landscape of communication becomes more complex and reveals itself through the voices and thoughts of children, through agreement and disagreement, through continuous negotiation that produces growth of thought and representation through many languages (that is, through many modes of symbolically representing ideas, such as drawing, painting, modeling, verbal description, numbers, physical movement, drama, puppets, etc.).

Small-group interaction will include processes of imitation, pauses, excessive leaps forward, and requilibrations. Children demonstrate sudden flares of ideas, explicit or silent exchanges, and dialogues into which the adult is also drawn. Unanticipated portholes of observation open for the adult. The adult discovers different ways in which children participate, choose, and proceed. From their observations, adults decide

what activities to select and how to respond, following as much as possible the motivations and interests of the children.

We consider small groups the most favorable type of classroom organization for an education
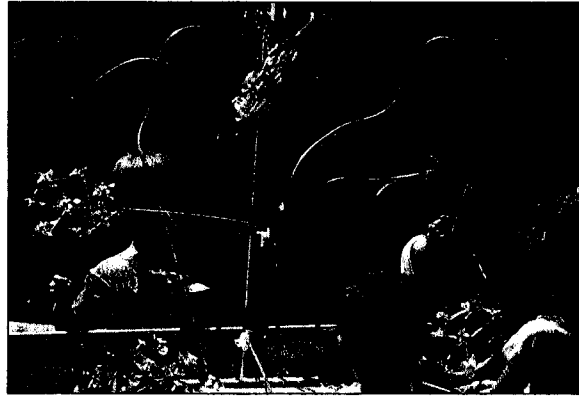
This fountain was planned and designed by children and built by teachers and children together for the small birds' amusement park.

based on relationships. Small-group activities involving two, three, or four children are most desirable, allowing for the most efficient communication. In small groups, complex interactions are more likely to occur, constructive conflicts take place, and self-regulatory accommodations emerge.

Analyzing this process in systemic terms may be helpful. The system of relationships in our schools is both real and symbolic. It is a physical system, a living organism, but at the same time it is a symbolic system of representation in which the adult is an adult and the child is a child. Together they ask questions, they listen, they refresh each other, and they give answers to each other. The children learn and communicate through concrete experiences. This fact escapes the censorship of both culture and the usual curricula—a system of relationship has in and of itself a virtually autonomous capacity to educate.

The interaction of children in small groups

The organization of small-group work is much more than a simple functional tool; it is a cultural context that contains within itself a vitality and an infinite network of possibilities. In schools of young children, work in small groups encourages processes of change and development and is much desired by children. Observing small-group work informs teachers about relationships among children, their participation and the roles that each child plays in the group; however, work in small groups should not be considered the only organizational model but rather should be one of many learning situations or choices that are provided for children.

Following is a set of principles for organizing and understanding the interactions among children when they are active in small groups. These principles are derived from our study of the literature (see Endnote) and from our direct experience, documented through our research in Reggio Emilia:

• Children learn by interacting with their environment and actively transforming their relationships with the world of adults, things, events, and, in original ways, their peers. In a sense, children participate in constructing their identity and the identity of others.

• Interaction among children is a fundamental experience during the first years of life. Interaction is a need, a desire, a vital necessity that each child carries within. Children seek opportunities for positive interaction with adults and other children.

• The interaction of children in small groups provides opportunities for negotiation and more fre-

quent, dynamic communications with other children. Such negotiation and communication produces more exchange than in adult–child interaction, or, at least, different, and no less relevant, exchanges.

• Children's self-learning and co-learning (construction of knowledge by self and co-construction of knowledge with others), supported by interactive experiences constructed with the help of adults, determine the selection and organization of processes and strategies that are part of and coherent with the overall goals of early childhood education.
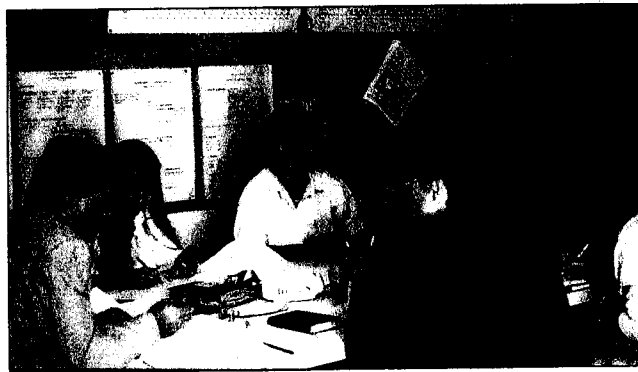
Pedagogisti *and the director of the early childhood education program hold weekly meetings.*

• Interaction among children affects social, emotional, communicative, and cognitive behavior and development; however, the content, form, and interactive processes will vary depending on quality, quantity, modifications, and coordination of different points of view. The results of these experiences will therefore be different from those usually reached by children working in isolation.

• Each interaction among children can produce different reactions, enriching personal relationships and enhancing listening and verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Interaction produces rediscovery of peers, heightened awareness of similarities and differences among

people, and the acquisition of new curiosities, knowledge, and symbolic awareness.

• Interaction minimizes negative results or, at least, provides children and adults with many possibilities to adjust and learn.

• In our experience, for exchanges among children to become more cooperative, the ages and developmental levels of the children in the group should not be too different. When adults initiate the choice of projects and the setting of situations, a more homogenous age-group helps to inform the planning and decisions.

• As we learn from social psychology, interactions among children are the natural site for cognitive conflicts and other possible conflicts that result from the exchange of different actions, expectations, and ideas. These constructive conflicts transform the individual's cognitive experience and promote learning and development. Placing children in small groups facilitates this process because among children there are not strong relationships of authority or dependence; therefore, such conflicts are more attractive and advantageous.

• Even when cognitive conflicts do not produce immediate cognitive growth, they can be advantageous because by producing cognitive dissonance, they can in time produce progress. If we accept that every problem produces cognitive conflicts, then we believe that cognitive conflicts initiate a process of co-construction and cooperation.

• Children's interactions provide a fruitful ground for symbolic construction, which derives in large part from cognitive abilities and from the forms in which they are manifested. Interactions increase the capacity on the part of children to step back from reality and to describe it anew, to demonstrate the emerging process of abstraction and recombination of ideas.

• At the same time, we should not forget the relevant role of make-believe play. This type of symbolic play is pervasive in young children's experience and has an important role in the social development of intelligence, development of the skills needed for reciprocity among children, the potential for children to persist in activity and conversation together, and development of the ability to create symbols.

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In conclusion, we must know that children, although naturally inclined, do not acquire the art of becoming friends or teachers of one another by finding models in heaven or in manuals; rather, children extract and interpret models from adults when the adults know how to work, discuss, think, research, and live together.

Endnote: *When Malaguzzi speaks of the literature, he refers to authors who have been writing about the social aspects of cognitive development, some of whom are familiar to American audiences, such as Vygotsky and Piaget, and others whose work is not as familiar, such as Carugati, Doise, Kaye, and Mugny.*