

Innovations

in early education: the international Reggio exchange

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THE TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

By Carlina Rinaldi

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We have now reached the moment of conclusions, of farewells. Concluding means creating a meaning, a synthesis, a message to take with us after our experience together. Each of you will draw his or her own conclusions. Each of you will decide what is useful and important, what to try to construct in your own contexts. I would like to underscore something that has been, and continues to be, one of the most significant elements among those that we have tried to highlight for you during these days . . . an element that has been fundamental to our experience: the concept of the teacher as a researcher.

Why is this concept so important? Why, among the many possibilities, do we emphasize the qualification of "researcher"? Research is a word with many meanings that can evoke laboratories, chemical formulas and science. It generally represents a clear and recognized methodology, and implies objectivity. The word research has a serious tone, and tends to be reserved for the few people who work in relationship with certain established and conventional procedures. It is a concept that inhabits universities or specialized centers for research. It is a word that does not circulate in the streets and squares. Research is not a word with common usage and, above all, it is not a concept that we normally think about putting into practice in our daily lives.

In schools, the word research usually means to gather a collection of information, to compile what is already known about a certain topic. Experiences and emotions

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that characterize “scientific” research . . . such as curiosity, the unknown, doubt, error, crisis, theory and confusion . . . are not usually part of school work or daily life. If they do enter into the context of life in the school, they are viewed as weak moments . . . moments of fragility, of uncertainty . . . that must be overcome quickly.

In my opinion, this is why true innovations are so difficult to accept and appreciate. They “shake up” our frames of reference because they force us to look at the world with new eyes. They open us up to what is different and unexpected. We tend to accept the status quo, that which we know and have already tried out . . . even when it does not satisfy us, even when it makes us feel stressed, confused or hopeless.

So, in this way, we try to defend our normality . . . the norms and rules we already know . . . to the detriment of the new. Only searching and researching can guarantee us that which is new, that which is moving forward. Yet, this normality excludes research as an everyday approach and, therefore, excludes doubt, error, uncertainty, curiosity, marvel and amazement as

important values in our daily lives. Thus, we are placing normality in opposition to research. I would like, instead, to propose the concept of “the normality of research,” which defines research as an attitude and an approach in everyday living, in schools and in life . . . as a way of thinking for ourselves and thinking with others, a way of relating with others, with the world around us and with life.

Where and how can we find the strength and the courage for this radical change? Once again, we must start with the children. The young child is the first great researcher. Children are born searching for and, therefore, researching the meaning of life, the meaning of the self in relation to others and to the world. Children are born searching for the meaning of their existence . . . the meaning of the conventions, customs and habits we have, and of the rules and the answers we provide.

Children’s questions (such as: “Why are we born?” “Why do we die?”) are precious, as are their answers because they are generative. Children’s theories (such as: “The sea is born from the mother wave.” “When

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you die, do you go into the belly of death and then get born again?") highlight the strongest characteristic of the identity of children and of humankind: searching for and researching meaning, sharing and constructing together the meaning of the world and the events of life. All children are intelligent, different from each other and unpredictable. If we know how to listen to them, children can give back to us the pleasure of amazement, of marvel, of doubt . . . the pleasure of the "why." Children can give us the strength of doubt and the courage of error. They can transmit to us the joy of searching and researching . . . the value of research, as an openness toward others and toward everything new that is produced by the encounter with others.

These concepts give strength to the notion of education and personal formation as an ongoing process of research. They give meaning to the value of documentation and listening made visible, which are not simply techniques that can be transported but ways of guaranteeing that our thinking always involves reflection, exchange, different points of view, and differences in assessment or evaluation. They are not only seen as didactic strategies but also as values that inspire our view of the world. The documentation materials we use attest not only to our path of knowledge regarding children but also to our path of knowledge about the child and humanity, and about ourselves. They also attest to our idea of the teacher as researcher, of school as a place of research and cultural elaboration, a place of participation, in a process of shared construction of values and meanings. The school of research is a school of participation.

Moreover, this concept of the normality of research is the best way to express what I believe is one of the particular aspects of our experience, one of the most topical "cultural knots" in these complex times: the relationship between theory and practice. The dichotomy of theory and practice, which has weighed heavily on the world of school and on our culture, could find a true dialectic and synthesis in this concept of research. Within this concept, theory generates practice that, in turn, generates new theories and new perspectives on the world. The theories come from the practice, but also orient and guide it. The theories are practical thoughts. My theories produce

my interpretations of reality. This is why theories should be continuously questioned and verified in an exchange with others.

When we say that school is not a preparation for life but *is* life, this means assuming the responsibility to create a context in which words such as creativity, change, innovation, error, doubt and uncertainty, when used on a daily basis, can truly be developed and become real. This means creating a context in which the teaching-learning relationship is highly evolved; that is, where the solution to certain problems leads to the emergence of new questions and new expectations, new changes. This also means creating a context in which children, from a very young age, discover that there are problems which are not easily resolved, which perhaps cannot have an answer and, for this reason, they are the most wonderful ones because herein lies the "spirit of research." Even though the children are very young, we should not convey to them the conviction that for every question, there is a right answer. If we did so, perhaps we would appear to be more important in their eyes and they might feel more secure, but they would pay for this security by losing the "pleasure of research," the pleasure of searching for answers and constructing the answers with the help of others. Children are capable of loving and appreciating us even when we appear to be doubtful or we do not know how to answer, because they appreciate the fact that we are side-by-side with them in their search for answers: the child-researcher and the teacher-researcher. Only in this way will children return with full rights among the builders of human culture and the culture of humanity. Only in this way will they sense that their wonder and their discoveries are truly appreciated because they are useful. Only in this way can children and childhood hope to reacquire their human dignity, and no longer be considered "objects of care" or objects of cruelty and abuse, both physical and moral. Life is research.

The school of research is a school that is open to others and to the new; indeed, it generates and proposes the new within this encounter. Perhaps this is what makes our encounter, the encounter with you, with a country that we have been in dialogue with for about twenty years, still current and vital. But above all, perhaps this is what makes it possible for our teachers to

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continue to work with pleasure and enthusiasm after so many years. In fact, we feel that we can contribute not only to the well-being of children and their families, but also to changing the culture of our city. Thanks to you and to our colleagues who come to Reggio from all over the world, we can all contribute together to changing the culture and the dialogue in the world, raising the level of understanding between us.

Today, like never before in the history of humanity (as far as we know), we are in communication with so many around the world. Our country is permeated with faxes, cell phones, the Internet and other networks. The awareness of being connected, joined, interdependent should bring people together but, in reality, the lack of understanding persists. The problem of understanding has become crucial for people everywhere. For this reason, understanding must be one of the aims of education. Educating toward the understanding of math, science or any other discipline is one thing; educating toward human understanding is another. Information, though necessary, is not sufficient for this depth of understanding. Explanations, which are also indispensable, are still not enough for true understanding.

Depth of understanding involves the ability to experience the curiosity, passions, joys and angers of others with a process of empathy, perception and identification, of human understanding. Always intersubjective, human understanding requires openness, sympathy and generosity. The children, the women and men of today, more than ever, need understanding on the part of other people who have open hearts and minds, people who know how to recognize their own personal and cultural limitations. This is why I hope, above all, that we have understood each other during this week. It would be the ultimate outcome of our time together.