



Sightlines Initiative

Experiences from the Winter Institute, Reggio Emilia

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Around 250 people from nearly 50 countries gathered in Reggio Emilia for the Winter Institute last month. The main theme of the Institute was “continuity”. As well as learning about the educational approach of the preschools and infant toddler centres we found out about new work taking place in primary schools, where atelieristas¹ are working alongside primary teachers. It was fascinating to hear about the development of the values and approach of the preschools in the more traditional arena of primary education, something that has not usually been part of previous study weeks. We heard about some of the many challenges, as well as new discoveries and insights. The educators we met, from both systems, had a strong intention to continue their work together in order to create a more unified educational approach for children in the city.

In Italy there are different education systems for children up to the age of six and older than six. Education for children aged between zero and six years in Italy is not compulsory, and there is great variability in services within and between regions. These services are often managed by the municipality or the church, rather than the state. The pre-schools and infant toddler centres in Reggio Emilia that we visited were mainly run by the municipality. There is a strong tradition in Reggio of parental and community involvement in preschools, with many being set up and even built by parents. The preschools and infant toddler centres are free to set their own curriculum, whilst following certain national guidelines. They work from the premise that children are citizens with rights, that schools should be places of research for both children and adults, promoting dialogue and many forms of expression.

Compulsory schooling for children aged six and above is managed through a national state system, and the same national curriculum is followed in all schools. The style of teaching is didactic, with children usually sitting in rows facing the teacher.

In Reggio there are various initiatives underway to explore how the researchful, democratic approach of the preschools can be continued and developed in primary schools. The “Officina Educativa” is a municipal organisation running projects across the city. It operates five centres which can be used by children or members of the public during the daytime. Work after school has been taking place over a number of years in various primary schools, exploring how the curriculum can be approached in new ways. Recently atelieristas working for the Officina Educativa have begun to work on projects alongside primary teachers in lesson time with particular classes of children. This is a very new and exciting development in the primary schools, and a great challenge for the staff involved.

¹ An atelierista is an adult working alongside teachers in a school, based in (though not confined to) the “atelier” or studio. An atelierista has an arts background and training, and supports children to carry out research using different expressive media.

We visited Leopardi Primary School, where atelieristas from the Officina Educativa are working in a project with nine and ten year old children and their teachers. Three different classes are working on different research foci, all connected with their national curriculum: “the city”, “perimeter and area” and “solving mathematical problems”. The teachers and atelieristas are investigating how these topics can be covered in such a way that children can work in groups and research questions together.

Some of the questions the adults are asking are:

- How does being in a group affect children’s learning?
- How does group composition affect the learning that takes place?
- When and how can subjectivity be a resource for the group?
- How does the group check its conclusions?
- How do children evaluate their own learning in the group, and the learning of the group?
- Is it important for children to make distinctions between subjects or not?
- What knowledge do children loan from other areas in order to solve a problem?
- How do children manage and learn from mistakes?

These kinds of questions, which have been explored for many years in Reggio’s preschools and infant toddler centres, are very new questions for the primary teachers who are not used to working with children in learning groups. Finding ways of working collaboratively has been a challenge for the teachers and atelieristas, who come from very different pedagogical backgrounds. One of the atelieristas explained that the adults were seeking to create a reciprocal alliance with one another, where they were able to listen to and learn from each other’s professionalism and experiences.

Later in the week we were able to visit the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre School, a unique project in Reggio where children of preschool and primary school age are all taught in the same school. Again, this is a new venture, and the teachers explained how their ways of working together across the school are constantly being modified.

We heard from the teacher of the nine and ten year olds class, who explained how her classroom is organised. There are collection points for ideas, and spaces which hold onto traces of things that the children and adults are researching, with pathways for future, deeper exploration. She explained, “This is a classroom skin which communicates”. In her class children often work in small groups, either working on different pathways of research or exploring the same thing from different points of view.

She explained the role of the teacher working with a group:

- Asking questions and supporting reflections on questions.
- Helping to build meaning around the activities that are being done.
- Working to build up the network of complex relations between things.
- Building a shared sense of orchestration.

- Crediting children with their original ideas, and their capacities for research and criticism.

The primary teachers in the International Centre School have been using the national curriculum as a starting point for research projects with their classes. One such project shared with us was based on the geography syllabus, around the notion of “points of view” (viewpoints). The teacher explained that she began the project with the class by inviting them to explore different viewpoints in the school building. Children drew the same view from different places and compared their drawings. The teacher retrieved some drawings done by the class two years previously, which had also been focussed on views around the school, and the children were able to compare their previous ideas. One girl, looking back at her previous drawing, made from a high window, realised “your point of view changes with your height”. The teacher explained what a valuable experience this kind of revisiting can be. Here are her paraphrased words, from my notes:

“It is important to conserve children’s work so that it is easily accessible and can be revisited. Children can “stratify” their learning. Perhaps the idea of going back and looking, the recurrence, is a way for children to structure their knowledge in increasingly complex and connected ways. It could be that children are given the opportunity not just to *look* at their old work but they are able to revisit the same *experience*, maybe in a slightly different way. These kinds of possibilities enable children to reflect on their own life experience and learning. They will have a new way of seeing, because they have new knowledge and they are older. Revisiting work makes it possible to create very subtle threads of meaning and give a sense of non-fragmentation of meaning in their lives.”

During the project the teacher documented the children’s realisations that there are many points of view, and that even one person can have many points of view:

“The point of view changes. It depends where you put your eyes, on your body, on your mind’s point of view, on the way you think...” Kevin, 8.2 years

“There are twenty-one of us here and twenty-one drawings. How many points of view are there, then? Perhaps our points of view (viewpoints) are infinite.” Samuele, 8.8 years

“Everyone has their own.” Tommaso, 8.5 years

The children and teachers went on to explore how points of view can change with the use of instruments, such as magnification. They also explored their local area and created their own maps. By examining and discussing each other’s maps, as well as printed modern and historical maps, the teacher explained how the children’s learning developed: they began to notice that the authors of the maps had particular intentions and had made decisions about what to communicate. She explained, “The children realised that maps offer different ways of seeing. You have to decide what you want to see and how you want to represent it.”

“How can you make a map without a point of view?” Hansel, 8.4 years

Another direction of research was to study the possible points of view of dinosaurs. One child said, “dinosaurs see and think differently”, and from what I remember, this question was how the enquiry began. The teacher worked with the whole class, asking them to come up with the set of questions that, if they knew the answers to them, they would know everything there is to know about dinosaurs. Together the children came up with sixteen questions. These were researched in more depth by smaller groups through discussion, modelling, factual books and the internet. Some groups of children subsequently created film documentaries illustrating their ideas about dinosaurs’ points of view.

As part of the project a large map was made on the classroom wall to show the directions of research that had been taken, and what had been learned. The children and teachers used the map to revisit and contextualise their thinking. Arianna (8.8 years old) explained, “We are doing one subject all together. This map can help us to let people understand the things behind what we have done and make us re-reason and understand.”

The class teacher spoke to us about the traditional fragmentation of school subjects, and her belief that this wasn’t the way children learned best. “In our minds there aren’t exercise books that open and close when a subject is finished. We believe learning should be fragmented as little as possible. This idea of the richness of knowledge gives us the idea that knowledge is infinite and we can always be curious about the world.”

Ronet (8.6 years old), from the International Centre School, said, “We have to make difficult questions, ones we don’t know. Easy are the questions of which we know things (sic). All research starts from questions. How do people know what the earth was like a long, long time ago if they weren’t there? I think that people weren’t there but animals were and they saw. Now we are a little bit animal and we remember something inside us but we have to ask ourselves a lot of questions to get out what we know.”

Learning to ask good questions (which don’t always have definite answers), to debate together, to listen to and learn from others’ points of view, are all part of the children’s and adults’ experiences in the preschools and infant toddler centres in Reggio. It was inspiring to witness the pioneering work in primary schools and to imagine how this might develop in the future. I believe that these primary school projects can be an inspiration to those of us who feel that our circumstances are challenging, and that there is much work to be done. Working together, we can continue to ask ourselves challenging questions about our practice; about how we can provide educational experiences which reflect our values and aspirations for children in their early years and beyond.

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