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Social Justice, Solidarity and Children's Rights**

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**EECERA**  
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**BOLOGNA - ITALY**  
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**ECE beyond the crisis: social justice, solidarity and children's rights**

The theme of the 27th conference 'ECE beyond the crisis: social justice, solidarity and children's rights' aspires to open a space of debate on the value of early childhood education services (from birth to 8 years) in contemporary times. In times of austerity, political realignments and renegotiation of national and international agreements, evidence-based research studies are increasingly needed to make the argument for investing and sustaining early childhood services compelling. The human capital and social investment paradigms that underpin such evidence are increasingly shaping the construction of childhood and education services which stand at the centre of rebuilding our society for a socially just, inclusive and stable future. The conference aims at creating a forum where a thought-provoking discussion on these issues takes place, by challenging and problematising the competing paradigms that are currently influencing research, policies and practices in the ECE field.

## STRANDS

1. VALUES AND VALUE EDUCATION
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12. PARADIGMS, THEORIES & METHODOLOGIES
13. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH IN ECEC

## *Infanzia* periodical and “the difficult things”

The first issue of the periodical *Infanzia* came out in September 1973. The periodical was launched at the initiative of Piero Bertolini (1931-2006), professor of Education Sciences at the University of Bologna and one of Italy’s key pedagogical figures of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other important Italian educational figures cooperated with Piero Bertolini in founding the periodical: Loris Malaguzzi, Franco Frabboni, Milena Manini, all committed to establishing a pedagogical thought guiding the then-emerging early childhood services and preschool system.

*Infanzia* was founded only five years after the establishment in Italy in 1968 of the “state maternal school”, which in 1991 changed its name to “Scuola dell’infanzia”, Infant School. A range of services were already available for the 3 to 6 age group prior to the establishment of the state-maintained maternal school, particularly private, Catholic-based organisations that were historically active in Italy in the field of educational establishments, as well as municipal schools, above all in some regions of central and northern Italy, which had developed municipal infant schools investing heavily in the experimentation of innovative educational models. In 1971, the law establishing municipal nursery for children aged 0 to 3 completed the framework of 0-6 preschool education in Italy. These remained the most fertile regions for the spread of culture, both due to the strong economic and social development underway at the time which underlined the families’ need for preschool services, and for the culture developing in the same period around the concept of child-centred education.

It was in particular in Bologna and the Emilia-Romagna region that the work of Piero Bertolini and his team developed. The greatest merit of this work was indeed the establishment of links between the University (particularly the “Giovanni Maria Bertin” Department of Education Sciences of the University of Bologna, where *Infanzia* was founded and is still based today) and the local territory, and between education and research. Here the conditions were created to allow zero-six preschool education to become an authentic workshop for pedagogical innovation, the results of which became recognised and appreciated in Italy and beyond from the 1980s onwards.

Bertolini soon realised that a periodical devoted specifically to preschool education was a necessary tool for explaining, as the periodical’s subtitle stated, the “Orientations, experiences, discussions on the educational problems connected to the management of nursery and infant schools”. This was a matter of placing scientific, critical and theoretical thought on preschool education in close contact with educational experiences, above all those deemed to be significant and original in terms of didactic methods and quality pedagogy.

In other words, fuelled by the phenomenological tension characterising his scientific thought, Bertolini’s project was that of a periodical which reflected the ideal of educational professionalism, which he defined as “pedagogical” as it was based on the close relationship between practice and theory in education. This focused both on the teachers, whose everyday work should be accompanied by moments of reflection and the construction of pedagogical intentionality, and on the researchers, who had to have direct contact with educational realities, in order to develop a concrete sense of the educational relationship and its problems.

*Infanzia* was therefore founded as a periodical that was not dedicated merely to research or theoretical-pedagogical speculation, nor did it aim to provide practical “recipes” for activities served up and ready for application and consumption in everyday educational work. Each issue of the periodical consists of a part dedicated to a thematic focus and topics concerning children’s education and culture, and another part dedicated to significant experiences implemented in nursery and infant schools and written by teachers or pedagogical coordinators. This issue of the periodical, especially produced for the EECERA conference in Bologna with the aim of introducing *Infanzia* to the international audience of participants, contains the first two articles written specifically for this occasion; the others, referring to experiences, were published in recent issues of the periodical and have been translated into English for this occasion. Until now, *Infanzia* has been an Italian periodical, open also



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Via Filippo Re 6 - 40126 Bologna  
e-mail: dipsceduc.infanzia@unibo.it

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to international contributions translated and published in Italian. Along with the publishers, we are working to produce an international on-line edition of the periodical in English in the near future to accompany the traditional printed periodical.

Continuing to follow its initial aims, today *Infanzia* defines itself as a "Periodical of studies and experiences on 0-6 education". The periodical keeps alive that cultural and epistemological challenge that still faces us today, after over 40 years of life of *Infanzia*, that theory and research on one hand, and educational work on the other, often reflect conditions and professions with different languages and needs. *Infanzia* in any case remains true to its mandate: the challenge of the complexity of a dialogue which is also a high idea of educational professionalism. "It is difficult to do difficult things", wrote Gianni Rodari, one of the greatest children's writers and educators, in his famous Letter to children written in 1979, exhorting them to "learn to do difficult things," saying that the easy ones, which anyone can do, don't offer the same satisfaction. On occasions teachers have said to us, "Yes, *Infanzia* is a great periodical, but it's a bit difficult...".

We would rather seek the right degree of difficulty (learning to do difficult things), than make *Infanzia* an "easy" periodical.

Roberto Farné, Editor

Full professor, Department for Life Quality Studies  
Bologna University

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Lucia Balduzzi

## Reforming the Italian early childhood education and care system through integration: current changes and future directions

*Lucia Balduzzi is associate professor of didactics and special needs education at the Department of Education Sciences 'G.M. Bertin' of Bologna University*

In Italy, an important reform of the Early Childhood Educational and Care (ECEC) system is in progress. On July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015 the *National Law n. 107* has been approved introducing the *'integrated system of education and training from the birth to six years'* (Article 1, paragraph 181, letter e) in order to overcome the split between childcare and early education services existing since the 60's. As the law-effected decrees

for the implementation of the ECEC integrated system are currently under discussion, the aim of this article is to reflect on the possibilities and challenges offered by the new legislative framework for realizing the transition from a split ECEC system to an integrated one.

In this paper, the actual organization of the Italian ECEC system, the professional profiles and the actual initial preparation of preschool teachers and educators will be illustrated; at the same time, the changes introduced by the new law will be delineated. In the conclusion, the strengths but also the potential risks underpinning such reform will be analyzed.



## The actual Italian context of ECEC

While waiting for the process of reform implementation, early childhood education and care provision is still organized within a split system. Early childhood services (*nidi d'infanzia* and *servizi integrativi*) attended by children under three years of age fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs while preschool services (*scuole dell'infanzia*), attended by children from 3 to 6 years, fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Within this split system, Regions and Municipalities have the administrative responsibility for the regulation and funding of services for under-threes and this has been one of the principal motivations for which the *nidi d'infanzia* were developed qualitatively and quantitatively differently across the country after their institution in 1971 (*Law 1044/1971*). In fact, these services are attended by 13.5% of the national child population under three years of age, although important regional disparities exist in attendance rates: i.e. the attendance is nearly 27.7% in Emilia Romagna Region but less than 2% in Calabria (ISTAT, 2015).

On the contrary, most *scuole dell'infanzia* are managed directly by the State that took over complete responsibility of these institution in 1968; the Law 444/1968 in fact led to development of state-maintained pre-schools and integrated previously existing institutions – mostly run by Catholic providers and municipalities – within the education system in order to ensure the generalisation of the service. Because of this historical path, the preschool sector is still organised according to a tripartite system, which encompasses State, municipal and private not-for-profit (mostly Catholic) providers. Currently the *scuola dell'infanzia*, although not compulsory, is a well-established educational institution, which is attended by approximately 96% of the 3-6 year-olds across the country. This last evidence underlines how the State intervention and support, both at legislative and financial level, represents an important driving force for the diffusion of the ECEC provision and the support to their attendance.

### The early years workforce: characteristics and training

As ECEC was traditionally provided within a split system, the key features of the early years workforce – professional preparation, qualification requirement and status – vary in relation to the segment of the



sector in which practitioners are working. The core practitioners working in services for under-threes (*nidi* and *servizi integrativi*) are commonly called *educatori* (educators). The minimum qualification requirement to work as an early childhood educator was, until now, a 5-years upper secondary school diploma (ISCED-3) in educational studies (*liceo socio-psico-pedagogico*). Instead, the core practitioners employed in the preschool sector are required – since 2010<sup>1</sup> – to hold a 5-years university degree (ISCED-5) in educational studies (*Scienze della Formazione Primaria*) that confers them an official teacher status (*insegnante di scuola*

1. Ministerial Decree 10-09-2010, no. 249: “Definizione della disciplina dei requisiti e delle modalità della formazione iniziale degli insegnanti della scuola dell’infanzia, della scuola primaria e della scuola secondaria di primo e secondo grado”: [www.miur.it/Documenti/universita/Offerta\\_formativa/Formazione\\_iniziale\\_insegnanti\\_corsi\\_uni/DM\\_10\\_092010\\_n.249.pdf](http://www.miur.it/Documenti/universita/Offerta_formativa/Formazione_iniziale_insegnanti_corsi_uni/DM_10_092010_n.249.pdf)

dell'infanzia e di scuola primaria) allowing them to work both in pre-school and primary school settings.

The curriculum of *Scienze della Formazione Primaria* Master Degree was conceived with the aim of better integrating content and overall educational methodologies between the pre-school and the primary school thought a unique training path that brings together the expertise of the pre-school teacher, of the primary school-teacher, and of the *insegnante di sostegno* (support teacher for children with special needs). The curriculum is characterised by a reciprocal interplay of theory and practice (project work, small-groups workshop activities) and in the strong partnership built up with school (work placement and analysis of field practices). These characteristics have been enhanced year after year, supplemented by the acquisition of language skills in English language at B2 level, of digital skills and of the educational competences necessary to support the inclusion of children with special need.

The model proposed by the SFP curriculum enhances a strong continuity among preschool and primary school. This political and cultural choice caused a certain apprehension among ECEC experts, who feared that the length and structure of the new qualification pathway would have increased the gap between educators' and pre-schools teachers' professionalism, undermining the continuity and a common pedagogical culture within the early childhood education sector. In particular, the fact that a narrow disciplinary approach became predominant and that a broader pedagogical approach to learning was left at the margin, have been interpreted by experts as potentially producing *schoolification* of early childhood education (Lazzari & Balduzzi, 2013; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2015).

The institution of the ECEC integrated system of education and training represents, therefore, a great challenge at different levels: from the organisational and pedagogical level of early childhood services and curricula to the overarching level of professional preparation of educators and teachers.

### From the Law 107/2015 to its application: what will change

Along this line, the first challenge is represented by the development of an integrated system of institutions that support continuity of education from birth to primary school and beyond. The Law 107/2015, in fact, foresees changes in relation to: a) the definition of the

structural and organisational standards of ECEC provisions; b) the new distribution of ECEC governance functions among State, Regions and Local Authorities (in particular Municipalities); c) the financing rules relating to both construction and management costs of ECEC services; d) the development of integrated centres for the education of children aged 0-6 (*poli per l'infanzia*).

The issue related to the structural and organisational standards regulating ECEC provision is particularly important because the formulation and enactment of national requirements could be a very powerful action to improve the quantitative increase as well as the quality improvement of ECEC services all over Italy, starting to overcome the strong heterogeneity characterising *nido* provision and attendance across the country. In these regards, the issues that the next government actions will have to face concern standard requirements for space (child/square-meter ratio, outdoor facilities), child:educator ratio and – more interestingly from our point of view – staff professional preparation and ongoing development. In relation to the latter, the figure of pedagogical coordinator plays a crucial role as explained in details by Schenetti's article within this journal.

In line with the principles stressed by European researches on early years practitioners' professionalization (CoRe, 2011; CARE, 2017) and by European Commission policy papers (*Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early childhood Education and Care*, 2014), Law 107/2015 acknowledges the crucial role played by initial training of educators and teachers for qualifying the ECEC integrated system. While the reform leaves unchanged the qualification required to obtain a qualified teacher status in pre-school and primary school (SFP master degree), tertiary education qualification requirements for early years educators are introduced: this implies that educators working in 0-3 provision will have to obtain a specific bachelor degree in ECEC in order to access the profession. In this sense, the principle underlying such reform is that initial professional preparation at university level for early childhood educators is necessary in order to reduce social and cultural inequalities.

The fact that university training is actually necessary for accessing the profession of *nido* educator is an important progress for the qualification of ECEC provision. However, as the SFP curriculum is strongly directed toward the construction of subject-specific competences necessary for teaching in the primary school – leaving less space to preschool education ap-

proaches and not focusing at all on early years pedagogy – the specificities of the two training *curricula* – namely the new *educatore di nido* degree and SFP degree – potentially introduce the risk of hindering a common reflection on ECEC as well as the risk of perpetuating the separation between the two profession.

The role of pedagogic coordination is another central point of the Law 107/2015 intervention. As Michela Schenetti has underlined in her contribution to this journal, the pedagogic coordination is a fundamental pillar for enhancing the quality of ECEC at services level – by sustaining practitioners' reflection on everyday practices – as well as for promoting the ongoing qualification of the entire system by connecting the pedagogical level with the organisational and local policy level. According to these principles, the Law introduces the professional role of pedagogical coordinator all over the country, including in those territories where – until today – coordination and ongoing development initiatives at local and regional level were rare or even absent. As foreseen by the reform, pedagogical coordination functions should be preferably undertaken at local level and managed by Municipalities. However, additional support will be needed in order to integrate the pedagogical coordina-

tion model – which was developed within municipal ECEC services (*nidi* and *scuole dell'infanzia*) and then extended to private Not-For-Profit providers (eg. social cooperatives, catholic-affiliated bodies) – also with state-maintained institutions where different models – such as vertical school leadership – are already in place.

Within the new law, both organisational and pedagogical tasks are ascribed to local pedagogical coordinators; in doing so, the reform delineates a broad professionalism for this role, whose functions allow him/her to work across the diversified sectors and providers of the ECEC system. In fact, the pedagogical coordinator will offer supervision and support not only to preschool teachers and educators but also to families attending ECEC services; furthermore it will sustain ongoing qualification initiatives at level of professional teams – through in-service development – as well as at system level – through community-responsive management and policy advocacy. It is possible to understand, therefore, the importance and the centrality of this professional figure and the relevance of its function of networking and of creating connection between the ECEC provisions (state, municipal and private NFP sector), the professionals, the children, the families and the local community.



## Toward the integrated system of education and training from the birth to six years: strengths and risks

The strong territorial characterization of the ECEC system represent, a very import strength and, at the same time, the most relevant risk. This characterisation – tied up both to specific political, cultural and pedagogical traditions – was caused by and has been reinforced from the creation of a split ECEC system where 0-3 provision was regulated and funded at local and regional level (Law 1044/1971) whereas the responsibility for 3-6 provision was centralised at national level (Law 444/1968). Despite that the new reform overcomes the split system by outlining integrated governance responsibilities at national level, the strong connection between ECEC services' development and local territories will remain. Rather, the gaps between regional and local territories risk to become even more sharp in relation to the promotion of ECEC services qualification initiatives and to staff continuing professionals development. The expansion and the organisation of ECEC services within the integrated system, in fact, will be strictly connected to the presence and organisation of *scuole dell'infanzia* on the local territory – ranging from 4hrs/day to 8hrs/day preschools – as well as to existing provision for under-threes – with *nido* being the most widespread model in Northern-Central Italy and Spring Sections within preschools (similar to the French *classes passerelles*) being the most common provision for children aged 2-3 in Southern regions.

In relation to the mandatory BA degree for early childhood educators anticipated by the reform, Universities will have to work closely with local 0-3 services in order to maintain the bridge between theory and practice that is currently characterising practitioners' initial professional development. However, this might be problematic especially in those context where *nidi* are rare and the connections with and among local stakeholders and public/private providers are weak.

The stronger risk is therefore that the Law 107/2015 will sustain the development of an integrated ECEC system where a broader infrastructure already exists because of a long pedagogical tradition (as for example in the well-known municipalities of Norther-Central Italy where ECEC services where created in the '60s), while failing to close the gaps in relation to ECEC provision and qualification in those are where the absence of such services is actually more relevant.

Therefore, the Law implementation decrees should also look into sustaining the creation of integration

tools preventing the risk that the split system will be maintained and reinforced on the ground of ECEC practices and staff professionalisation, leaving *de facto* things as they are. Otherwise the risk is that – quoting the words that Tomasi di Lampedusa, in his novel *Il gattopardo*, gives to Tancredi – “*everything has to change in order to maintain everything as it is*”.

For this reason, it is of almost importance to reaffirm the key role that pedagogical coordinators could potentially play as system figures, ensuring a real integration of 0-3 and 3-6 services at the level of pedagogical practices – by sustaining collegial reflection and joint professional development initiatives – and advocacy – by striving for the qualification of early childhood services which are to be responsive of children's right to education and care from birth to compulsory school.

As the next months will be crucial for understanding how the legislative guidelines will be implemented and what will be the role of educators' and coordinators' professional preparation in this process, a collective effort and commitment it is necessary in order to avoid that the above-mentioned risks become a reality. In this sense, Italian Universities should deeply reflect – in collaboration with all stakeholders – to define the *professional profiles* and *curricula* that will provide to prospective educators and pedagogical coordinators the cultural and educational tools needed to qualitatively sustain an integrated system of ECEC services where children's right to education and care stands at the centre and where social inclusion is realised within a democratic endeavour.

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## The figure of the Pedagogical coordinator for creating *democratic* educational contexts

*Michela Schenetti is researcher of didactics and special needs education at the Department of Education Sciences 'G.M. Bertin' of Bologna University*

The choice of dedicating a contribution to the topic of pedagogical coordination in Italy stems from the awareness of the central role played by a coordination structure in promoting the quality of Italian childcare services instead, the professional definition of the pedagogical coordinator has changed in time, due to the fact that the figure and role of pedagogical coordinator need to be continuously redefined, in step with social, educational and economic developments.

As Balduzzi underlined in the previous contribution, the very long history of Italian ECEC services is marked by experimentation and achievements which have taken a long time to mature specific identities, which indeed vary greatly in regional and national terms. In the Seventies, in Italy, as in other European countries, there was a great expansion in quantitative terms.

Investigating in particular the role of the Pedagogical Coordinator, we must state that no national law governs this particular figure or its functions or presence within early childcare services. This topic is regulated at regional level: that because pedagogical coordinators have developed above all in some regions of northern and central Italy (Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, Lombardy and Piedmont), in those contexts in which local municipal and regional investments have facilitated this commitment. The spread of this figure followed the quantitative expansion of the services (Lazzari, Picchio, Musatti, 2013). The more the municipalities invested in the services at a political and economic level, the larger these became with an increasing need for the presence of coordinating figures. This aspect has inevitably led to wide range of different experiences, also in relation to the role and functions of the Pedagogical Coordinator.

### Professionalism in evolution

With these assumptions, it is easy to see how the first pedagogical coordinators evolved in the mid-Seventies, following the new demands emerging with the birth of nursery schools. The most important and famous pedagogical coordinators were generally exceptional figures, for examples we can remember Loris Malaguzzi, Sergio Neri, Bruno Ciari, Duilio Santarini, working throughout the provinces of Emilia Romagna. They, with their vocational training and political culture, were able to activate a social state able to respond to the educational needs arising as a result of the country's great social and economic transformations. Their teachings had a positive effect on the choice of the more attentive municipalities, who began to use the new coordinator figure, appointed the task of requalifying educational services, through educator training and coordination with the local community. In subsequent years, along with the administrative managers in the local authorities, the coordinators began to work together to reorganise the existing services and, above all, open new facilities following a path aiming to create good quality services for the 0-3 age group. In the following years, nido 0-3 began to spread across the country, and during this time the coordinators played a fundamental role: that of creating awareness among families and the public opinion on children's needs and quality of early childhood provision (Mantovani, 2010). During the second half of the Eighties, on the wave of the great transformations in the country and the birth and dissemination of new types of services (in particular meeting places, centres for children and parents, children spaces), the need emerged to find new pedagogical solutions, fundamental for responding to young children's needs for socialisation and development. In this scenario, new interest in the pedagogical coordinator was kindled, assigning increasingly more and complex tasks to this figure. Gradually the need for an even more multi-functional professional figure arose, dealing with the coordination of nursery school staff in the context of an integrated and much broader system of childcare services.



In the Nineties, following the economic crisis accompanied by the debate on the crisis of the Welfare State and public funding, social and ECEC services were subject to contractions over their costs. As the resources destined for these services were cut, many municipalities decided to drastically downsize their nursery services, while the more aware local authorities, in promoting a spending review policy, adopted alternative ways of managing the services. And thus a rethinking of the public role of social policies and social services was associated to the reform of the public administration. Many local authorities decided to appoint other organisations to manage these services, and by signing agreements and launching tenders the season of the principle of subsidiarity between public and private began (in particular social cooperatives). In this way, while reducing the costs of personnel management and service organisation, the public sector in any case maintained the “ownership” of the services, and in this sense offered new challenges for the coordination and control of the

provision of services. The identification of the quality criteria and requirements the services had to meet in order to become accredited, is still under the responsibility of the Municipality. The municipality must also ensure all the users of the various services a single, coherent model of educational service quality. Another challenge concerned the methods of supporting the accredited services with lifelong learning, involvement of the families and promotion of the childcare culture throughout the territory. Equally important was the overall coordination of an increasingly articulated system of services, now composed not only of preschools and new types of services but also other forms of directly managed and accredited services. This set of factors had considerable consequences on the role and functions of the Pedagogical Coordinator. First of all, the number of Coordinators increased. Younger pedagogists were hired with renewable or permanent contracts, while the historical Pedagogical Coordinators held managerial roles in the newly established Sectors and Services in the

local authorities. The increase in the number of staff was determined by a two-fold need. On one hand, being able to count on competent staff coordinating the services from the inside, providing pedagogical support and supporting the quality of service, overseeing the work organisation, educator training and the relations with families, administrators and the local community; on the other hand, benefiting from staff able to coordinate the system on a different level, overcoming the micro-systems of individual services to focus on the educational macro-system as a whole and its overall managerial and organisational problems linked to the understanding of demand and needs, the supply of resources and the control and safeguarding of quality.

And thus, at the turn of the new millennium, two fundamental functions of the Pedagogical Coordinator were defined: on one hand, the understanding of local social needs in order to plan services responding to the real needs of the local citizens; on the other, the identification of the resources required to imple-

ment the services. These functions are in addition to the above-mentioned experiences relating to the monitoring of the services system and the educational quality identified by common indicators, as well as the pedagogical and organisational support to working groups through training and support for pedagogical planning. And, having been distinguished for thirty years for its pedagogical and political intent to promote the development of nursery schools, in this period it was precisely Emilia Romagna that promoted the first real formal recognition of the Pedagogical Coordinator figure as well as pedagogical coordination, understood as a learning opportunity for group reflection on the task of coordination. With law no. 8/2004, the Region formally recognised the “Provincial Pedagogical Coordination Offices” which had already been working for some time in many Provinces, seen as privileged opportunities for pedagogical reflection and development, in-service training, inter-institutional exchange between operators and private and public managers as well as the sharing of



experiences and the promotion of the childcare culture. As Musatti and Picchio well explained 'over the years an increasing number of local governments have employed one or more pedagogical coordinators to support the educational practice in the ECEC services in the area and express a coherent educational policy. [It is precisely] the diffusion of these personnel contributed to the development of an early educational culture in Italy relevantly' (Musatti, Picchio, 2010: 144-145).

### From the coordinator to coordination: roles, functions and competences

Today coordinators work in three institutional realities established on the basis of three organisational models: municipal, state-funded and private-accredited. Although different, these models agree on the role, functions and competences required to ensure high quality coordination.

The strength and skill of the coordinator profession lies in the ability to communicate, transfer knowledge, foster and enhance collegiality, develop knowledge alliances with colleagues working in social and health sectors. This collegiality includes different figures: the nido staff, the families, colleagues, administrators, state or private pre-school directors; all the different professional profiles working together who receive and transmit work instructions and professional practices which are at times agreed and other times implemented individually, with a direct acceptance of responsibility.

While putting these different contexts in contact, at the same time the coordinator supports co-developmental processes for all the participants, helping to create a system of services for children and their families and promoting the culture of the rights of the child on different levels.

A fundamental task of pedagogical coordinators is therefore also that of fostering the collegiality in each service, which must also be able to count on their systematic and continuous, although not necessarily daily, presence. To function correctly, the working group depends on the quality of service, as only by overcoming an individualistic and private vision of education is it possible to create *democratic* educational contexts.

One of the Coordinator's key responsibilities also lies in relation to the pedagogical project, that document which animates and organises every educational reality. This responsibility also appears to be directly



linked to the correct functioning of the working group. If the coordinator is able to enhance the professional and individual qualities of every member, and at the same time foster a climate of well-being felt by the workers in their everyday relations with colleagues, the pedagogical project and general performance of the educational service will benefit.

Another task of the coordinator is that of *stimulating reflexivity among the educators*, allowing them to process their own experiences and promote them as professional practice. In fact, for the organisational operation of the service, it is crucial that the performance of every educator be linked to that of all the others, sharing a common framework of reference and building agreements on the meaning of their intervention. For the pedagogical coordinator, this means helping both individuals and the group in this process of researching and developing meanings and connections between the service and the new demands coming from the social context. To do this, pedagogical coordinators have to put a range of competences into play to guarantee the activation of effective working processes within an overall integrated operation, but also have to ensure that relations are maintained between people and between groups: clarifying objectives, supporting decisions, ensuring communication, checking and monitoring the results of the work. To develop and improve

group leading skills, they also require the ability to interpret problems, understanding the difficulties and relational aspects conditioning cooperation and production among the educators, clarifying the hypotheses underlying the educational work and the organisational operation of the services, connecting and integrating the work of individuals and groups and, last but not least, managing the – often scarce – resources.

It must be underlined how coordination in the Italian experience does not refer to a hierarchical model, where *top-down* communication is preferred to exchange and discussion, in which coordinators play their own role by giving instructions and ensuring they are carried out, but rather to a collaborative model supporting the work teams in the many challenges of their day-to-day educational tasks, and here the educational working group offers that fundamental space for promoting a system of quality services which dialogues constantly with the local community.

Whatever the specific knowledge required for the role, which lies beyond the scope of this contribution, it is essential for Coordinators to hold specific competences linked to the role of *group leader/facilitator*. Referring to the leader/facilitator figure means to refer to “a leader who while holding guidance and legislative functions, acts as a facilitator who works not for the group but with the group: enhancing individual resources, promoting dialogue in interaction, stimulating co-responsibility in achieving personal and common goals” (Franta, 1997: 34). It is not therefore a style of leadership, that comes from the management role covered, but rather one which is implemented through the professional support to group reflectivity and joint initiative.

This means that Coordinators must be able to be proactive, taking on different responsibilities with trust in both themselves and others, free of stereotypes and prejudices, but above all they must be able to communicate clearly and authentically.

Explaining the Italian perspective of the coordinator role, where present when we talk of this professional figure at the same time clearly we talk of coordination not only of individual services but above all a network of services, and therefore a system which must be interpreted first and foremost within a technical and political strategy which can be implemented also by a range of professional profiles precisely to cover and respond to all the educational and social needs and resources linked strictly to each territory.

## The criticalities of the profession

As the types of services and the problems linked to their management and integration multiply, research has been carried out also in Italy on the issue of pedagogical coordination of childcare services, consistent with the research carried out across Europe on similar figures found in France, Belgium, Romania and Portugal. In particular a survey carried out by the University of Bologna in 2011 gathered and analysed the perceptions of pedagogical coordinators in service for many years on the most serious criticalities facing their own profession (Balduzzi, Manini, 2012).

Pedagogical coordinators are required to be an aware partner in the local networks, but most of those surveyed stated that networking is the part of the work which has the most serious difficulties. The main reasons offered to explain the criticalities described cover various levels of problems. First of all the *difficulties in communicating with professionals and operators in different nodes of the network*, often due to a lack of mutual listening but also the lack of a common language and methodology, which means that dialogue is often missing, thus hindering the construction of single, common pathways. But also the *difficulty in coordinating work times* of the different figures, as the temporal disparities prevent answers to questions being promptly and consistently received.

In its methods, the complexity of the coordinator role mirrors the cultural complexity, and the multiple functions demanded of the role are the most evident representation of this. This complexity is accompanied by the ambiguity over the tasks which must be privileged and the difficulty in finding ways of listening to the different needs coming from the family and social worlds. Many coordinators involved told how relations between school and family should not be considered a criticality, as often happens, but rather a fundamental working nucleus for discussing identity, dialogue and listening.

The issue of identity is considered as central and is defined not only in relation to the different cultures in educational services but also in relation to the culture of *change* and *flexibility*. Coordinators recognise the need to keep in step with the times, but at the same time demonstrate resistance to change and difficulties in challenging consolidated stereotypes and beliefs concerning the tasks and functions of educational services in relation to family and social models.



Another central issue is deemed to be that of *co-ordinator training* which is reported to be partial or inconsistent compared to the two main areas covered by the work: pedagogist on one hand and service organiser on the other.

The considered research underlines how the identified criticalities were often accompanied by the identification of methods for overcoming them, the coordinators themselves offering perspectives for improvement. The professionalism characterising these coordination figures could be defined as ‘professionalism in progress’, as it is never characterised by certainty or convictions written in stone. A professionalism in progress, strengthened and reinforced by the recognition of being constantly placed “in relation”, taking shape and gaining value precisely from its relations. In the background, the image taking shape does not refer to the mere application of procedures, but strongly underlines the need for coordinators to have a command of knowledge, skills and compe-

tences which can then be applied critically and pertinently in combination. Only in this way will they be able to remain within that plural and constantly evolving complexity characterising today’s society and services.

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Giovanni Castagno, Andrea Chianelli

## A children's theatre

Listening, play and cooperation in the game of life



**Giovanni Castagno** *Teacher at the "La Maisonnette" international preschool in Rome*

**Andrea Chianelli** *Theatre operator at the "La Maisonnette" international preschool in Rome*

In the past few years, from different parts of the school world voices have been raised which, if not directly against, have in any case expressed doubts over the use of theatre in school curricula. Indeed, in the past children were often pressurised by both teachers and parents, all overly focused on the end result, the "school play", to be clear, which partly undermined the contribution this very powerful instrument can offer when used in schools with both younger and older children.

Not even the introduction in many school contexts of the so-called "expert" (director, actor, acrobat, musician) seems to have led to a reversal of this trend, indeed in many cases it is precisely the "theatre

workshop" that has triggered these strange mechanisms, the consequence of which, both in terms of teaching and in terms of the specific acquisition of precise theatrical skills, has been a generally negative trend, short-circuiting those fertile exchanges which can instead be offered for these two different worlds. This is probably because it is not sufficiently clear that theatre at school can, in terms of the curriculum, offer a central role for the individual-child and that such attention must be structural and structuring.

### The theatre and La Maisonnette

Despite the fact that in our school the choice of the theatre workshop run by an expert (in our case Andrea Chianelli) was made many years ago, we think, perhaps with a sprinkling of presumption, that, in contrast to what often happens, it has been possible to run a different – if somewhat complicated – experience, but which has allowed us to develop synergies and exchanges for the benefit of the children, never considered as interlocutors to be filled with empty notions, or passive subjects to be trained

\* Nomination for the award "Best Preschool Project Infanzia - Piccolo Plauto 2017".

or tortured with the mnemonic learning of lines beyond their ability, but rather as active subjects with whom to explore aesthetic and above all relational experiences together.

A relationship has therefore been developed between those with a series of specific knowledge and the teachers, a relationship focusing specifically on debunking all the myths we feel that in some cases are generated in the use of theatre with children.

The aim of the work the team of teachers conducted with Andrea Chianelli was not to reach the end of the school year with a performance in which the children showed off their histrionic talents, like budding actors in performances which inevitably create distances, placing some children excessively in the spotlight to the detriment of others who are more timid. The aim was rather to work throughout the whole year to develop the relationships, roles and emotions theatre allows them to explore, and this process takes place with total indifference towards the talents, the “qualities”, the skills some children show more of than others, skills it is not our task, nor that of the experts, to highlight.

#### A few more explanations of the work method

Theatre. This word is charged with different meanings for each of us, but is in any case always a byword for emphasis and evocation. We think of, and imagine, children who are entertained and entertaining. But in preschools, the value of theatre is first and foremost

educational, because at this age theatre is very close to play. The possibility to impersonate, transform oneself, fly or swim at the bottom of the sea, is an easy and immediate dimension for children. And our activity is based precisely on this concept. The proposals are drawn up in the form of a game in which the children have to discover and follow the rules, they can try them out, but in the end (and here we move into the more commonly understood form of theatre) they must demonstrate their skill in having reached a given result. The strange thing we have experimented and seen over the years is that the children themselves want to show us what results they have achieved. For this reason the activity can be associated to any topic, from travel to fear, from balance to war. And precisely for this reason, we rarely begin from a previously written text. The children, on the basis of the readings, and what is important for them, bring a life to the text that is unique for every work group.

We do have one special trick, however, if we can call it that: the proposal must always be open to many interpretations and not set *a priori* once and for all; it must be rich in possibilities, different interpretations, and the children must be aware that they have the possibility to change direction whenever they feel the need to.

The children do all the rest, with that desire to learn and overcome their own limits which is their distinctive feature, that desire they have to live in the shoes of a hero even if only for a moment, to be a princess or a simply a sailor.



### The path

Between October and June, the class of five year olds and their teachers, along with Andrea Chianelli, prepared a project starting from some initial ideas, some possible paths the educational team began to share and develop, starting a discussion with the children right from the first days of school. The huge repertoire of stories, from classic to contemporary theatre, were initially explored in class, and a series of stories were presented, then focusing on the one which was most suited to the group and the conceptual macro-area chosen each year in the school as a focus for the work. Having worked throughout the year on the various topics which the sensitivity of each teacher is able to explore, we reach the moment of the performances, the day of the play, using traditional terminology, the day on which the children “take things seriously”, and the enthusiastic and thrilled children find themselves on stage, proud of being actors for a day in one of the capital’s most renowned locations, the famous Vascello Theatre, where who knows, perhaps one day they will return to, not just as spectators.

### The journey and food

The last school year was marked by the focus the schools working with the La Maisonnette method had decided to use: the two-fold topic of travel and food. When we think of travel literature and the stories investigating this topic, we can think of an infinite number of references. Equally infinite are the references to stories that cross or are built around the question of food and nutrition. Thus through a series of very stimulating discussions, we reached Homer’s mythical characters, in the belief that the world of classical mythology and the history of Ancient Greece could offer very interesting territories for our work. Thus moving far back in time and space, we reached Attica in the twelfth century before Christ, to find out about the adventures of Odysseus, that famous character and his travel companions, the stories behind their pilgrimages across the Mediterranean, and their loved ones who spent many years at home waiting for their nearest and dearest to return.

### Description

Within a story that is so steeped in possible fields of investigation, the teachers decided to propose three different routes, working with the children on different experiences that aroused their interest starting from a range of different approaches and points of view.

The character of Penelope was therefore taken as a pretext by the English language teacher to work on the topic of colours and weaving, a possible metaphor for talking about space, physical and symbolic limits,

relations, to think about the intrinsic difficulties of an extremely precise manual work like weaving, which implies a complete command of fine motor skills.

The wind and the character of Aeolus who hinders Odysseus in his journey homewards were presented by the French teacher to stimulate thoughts exploring the places of physics and the perception of the movement of things around us, then broadening the horizons to the idea of colours which the topic of wind could suggest to the children, further supported in this work by the reading of the wonderful book by French author Anne Herbauts and published in Italy by Gallucci, *Di che colore è il vento?*

Gastronomy and the use of food made by the Greeks was on the other hand the investigation proposed by the Italian teacher who, starting from some descriptions found in Homer’s text, tackled the topic of food and the changes and celebrations of some foods over others, and how modern history has profoundly modified our relationship with food. Spelt, broad beans, chick peas, pulses, goat’s cheese were observed, smelled and finally tasted in a group meal which helped to imagine more concretely how the protagonists of one of the most important cultural revolutions in the history of man ate.

The food theme is of course not limited to examining the gastronomic aspects, because it was even more interesting to think about the meaning the ancient Greeks gave to mealtimes, considering that games, music and performances were all part of this time, particularly during more important banquets. After an interesting exploration of the historical sources available, we thought it was particularly appropriate, starting from a photograph of the famous ceramic *klyx*<sup>1</sup> kept at the British Museum in London, to rediscover the game of *kottabos*. The game consisted in throwing the last drop of wine in one’s glass into a plate placed in the centre of the table. Who managed to do so won the right to continue to drink before all the other diners. Of course the game was tailored to our needs, replacing the wine with water. Taking advantage of the springtime and the first sunny days, we had fun trying to hit a container placed at a distance of a couple of metres with a cup full of water.

### The workshop on Thursday and the rehearsals on Friday

Having presented the story of the Odyssey, the children acted out short scenes, imagining themselves as mermaids, sailors, gods, heroes, working in rotation to build emotional proximity to the characters

1. The *kylīx* (κύλιξ, plural κύλικες, *kýlikes*) is a ceramic wine cup used in Ancient Greece, documented from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. onwards. Typical object used in symposia, a drinking cup used during libation offering playful entertainment when playing *kottabos*.



and identify themselves with them, slowly building up an association between the children and the characters, which had become so familiar to them that they were often used in their play even outside of the hours at school dedicated specifically to the project, demonstrating the fact that the children's interest was spontaneous. The tables were moved to create a stage, the chairs arranged as the stalls and the classroom transformed into an improvised theatre.

While during the workshop with Andrea the focus was on some exercises aiming to understand the expressive possibilities of the body, the sensitivity that can be stimulated through music, motor coordination, the rehearsals on Friday offered an opportunity to integrate the work done, reinforcing the importance of theatrical practice and the need, to ensure its effectiveness, to go beyond the boundaries of the weekly sessions with the expert, motivating the teachers to put their own skills into play and work on their own with the children.

Some of the scenes performed during our rehearsals were not included in the final performance, some of the characters portrayed were not celebrated on the stage. Nausicaa and her father Alcinoos, Demodocus, Laertes, Tiresias, Telemachus and Apollo were played with a passion, but the children had to forego their presence on stage as we tried to isolate the scenes of the story which seemed most significant for the children, offering them all the space that was needed. The final arrangement of the performance inevitably involved cutting some parts, but in fact this strengthened the children's understanding of the correct choices made, increasing their awareness

of the fact that theatre is a work of cooperation and exchange, within which codes, methods and practices of cohabitation and agreement are built, without which the whole game cannot be successful.

### Conclusions

Theatre is an extremely important educational tool, and more: it is a way of learning that we feel we cannot do without. Not only does it build references to different topics, presenting children the knowledge required to explore with enthusiasm and a true spirit of research, but it also allows us to work on the complex plane of the relational balances within a group, tackling problems which often cannot otherwise be faced and which underlie all work aimed at inclusion and the refusal of more hidden forms of division which within any group can seriously compromise the serenity of all members. As Rodari stated, theatre can become a game of life if life is transformed into a huge container of theatrical possibilities. It can create spaces for creativity, a source of huge satisfaction for the children. With its polysemic dimension, its being pure and interdisciplinary at the same time, the theatre can combine gestures, movement, sound, words, images, which together help to build stories rich in sense and meaning.

Theatre is educating to listening, listening to others but also to ourselves, it is the possible base on which to rest an empathic vision and creative attitude to life shared with our peers, or as is increasingly stated, attitudes inspired by prosociality, i.e. that ability to interact positively with others without necessarily expecting anything in return.

Giorgia Lodi

## The three little pigs A fairy tale: children and the earthquake\*

**Giorgia Lodi** Degree in Primary Education Sciences (specialisation Preschool Education), University of Bologna. Works as a teacher at the Preschool in Massa Finalese (Mo)

Starting from the fairy tale of the three little pigs, my aim was to analyse the processes of understanding a story, using images, to identify the most effective ones for helping children to comprehend a story.

What role do images play in understanding a story? Which images do children prefer? I wanted the children to focus their attention on the pictures. How would the children behave when looking at different illustrations?

### Why the story of the three little pigs?

On 20 May 2012 the earth trembled, Emilia was hit by an earthquake that ripped away the homes, work and affections of many families. After the initial sense of bewilderment, the towns were invaded by the Fire Brigade and Civil Defence volunteers. Roads were closed, and some people could not reach their own homes. The football fields and gardens were transformed into tent cities. The schools were closed. Some people left for safer places, many remained but no longer had a job. These painful experiences did however bring some positive things: demonstrations of solidarity, and the desire to help each other. In the midst of all this, the children.

I live in Finale Emilia and work in a nursery school in Massa Finalese, both towns in the province of Modena affected by the earthquake. I am a teacher, and for myself, the children and their parents, the start of this school year was far less serene than others. The first few days of the new term were spent with some fears, both those of the parents who had to “leave” their children (some for the first time in three months), and those of the teachers, who had to be responsible for the pupils. The most serene of all were the children themselves, who wanted to see their classmates again, play together and spend time in peace. Because they too had experienced the earthquake, directly and through the words of their parents, grandparents and relatives.

\* Nomination for the award “Best Preschool Project Infanzia - Piccolo Plauto 2015”.

Processing a trauma is a difficult task, almost impossible when done alone<sup>1</sup>.

Returning from the long summer holidays, my colleagues and I were faced with children who had broadened their vocabulary with words like propping, securing, cracking... How could I transform these traumatic experiences into something positive? I didn't want to talk to them about the earthquake again, but I wanted to find out about their experiences, what they had felt during that time, how they had spent that odd summer, what they had done, who they had spent time with...

Words and pictures can arouse strong emotions, in every book we browse through, read, look at, we can find stories we can use and which children need to help them grow and face their own fears and anxieties. We thought that children like stories. Children like looking at the pictures in the books.

With this in mind, I decided to propose the story of “The three little pigs”; a story that talks of houses, and at the moment this is a topic that affects them very personally. The homes in Emilia were damaged, some children could not go back to theirs ever again, others for a few months, some of the luckier ones had already returned home. Safe homes, unsafe homes, homes that collapse, homes that resist. Which are the safest houses?

Everyone tells their own story, “The three little pigs” is a fairy tale that aims to build a sense of security in children when thinking about their own homes, as they play with a story they can ward off their fears and smile, have trust in their own homes, spreading a sense of serenity. Our houses are all built with bricks, so, if we listen to what the three little pigs say, they should be the safest, so why did some of them collapse? The images in the story of the three little pigs show houses that collapse, but the end, when they are all safe in the house of bricks and they defeat the wolf, is very reassuring.

1. The issue of processing trauma has been discussed in a number of texts and articles published in many journals dealing with childhood: Marco Dallari, Michela Schenetti, *Però era il terremoto e poteva tornare... Disegni, racconti e conversazioni per elaborare un trauma* in *Infanzia*, n. 4/2010, p. 264-267. Marco Ius and Paola Milani, *Resilienza a scuola tra pentole e possibilità*, in *Bambini*, October 2012.

### The role of images in children's literature

"In our society the formation of the subject is broadly woven with images; we discover and get to know the world through two processes: the first is that of direct experience in our relationships with the environment, with objects and people; the second is that of mediated experience through representations of environments, objects and people which are not really accessible to us". This statement by Antonio Faeti (2001) shows the importance images have in our everyday experience. Children are continuously in contact with a range of iconographical repertoires: from the pictures illustrating fairy tales to picture books, from film to television, images that are commented together with parents and their peers. What emerges is children's natural need to know new things, nearby and distant realities.

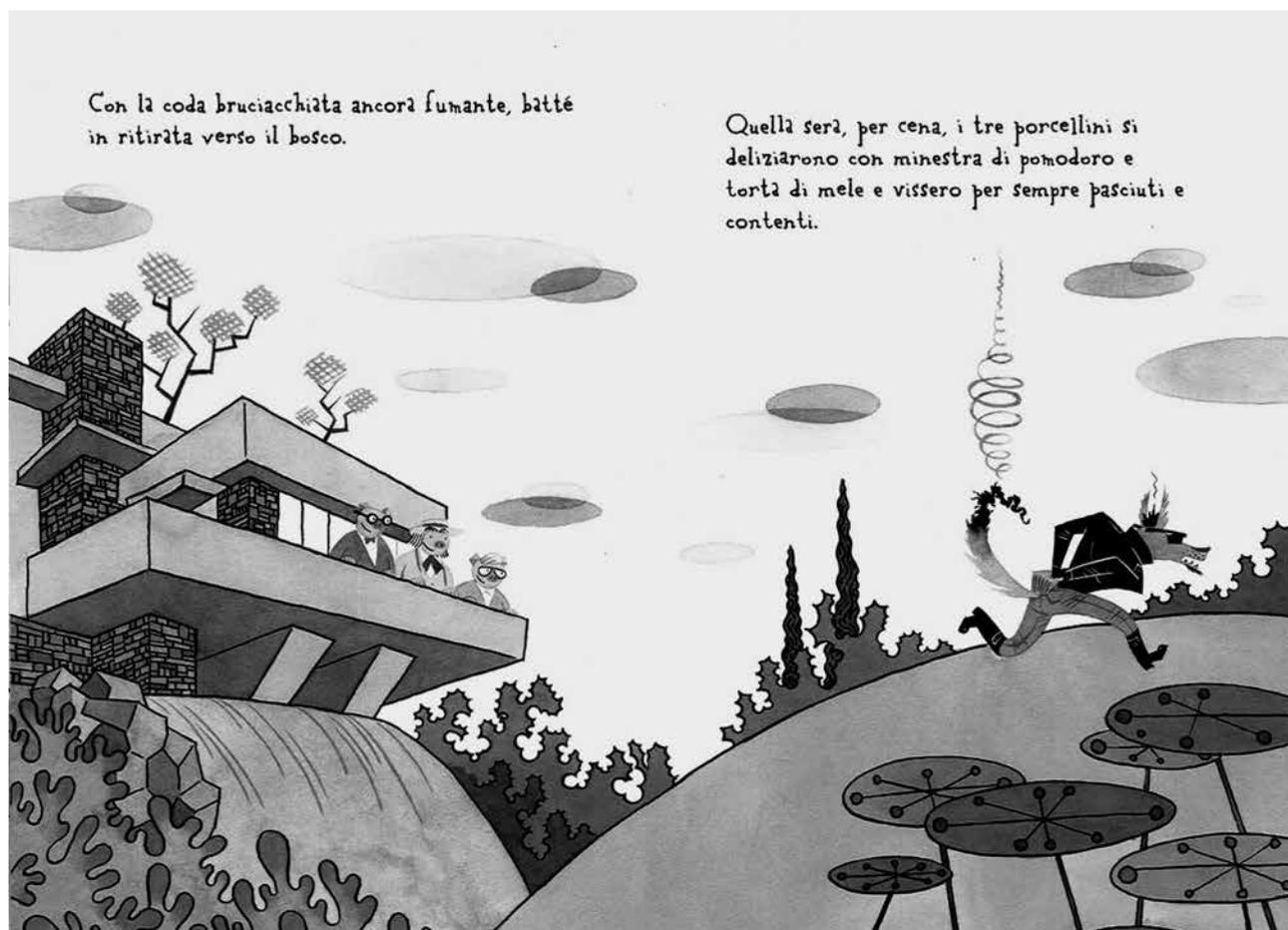
Books are an exceptional opportunity for stimulating children to look and understand, think about what they see and build links between single images, think about a text and process the information they text conveys and suggests.

Today more than ever, picture books are one of the most interesting resources in the educational relationship in childhood (Dallari, 2009). Offering a picture

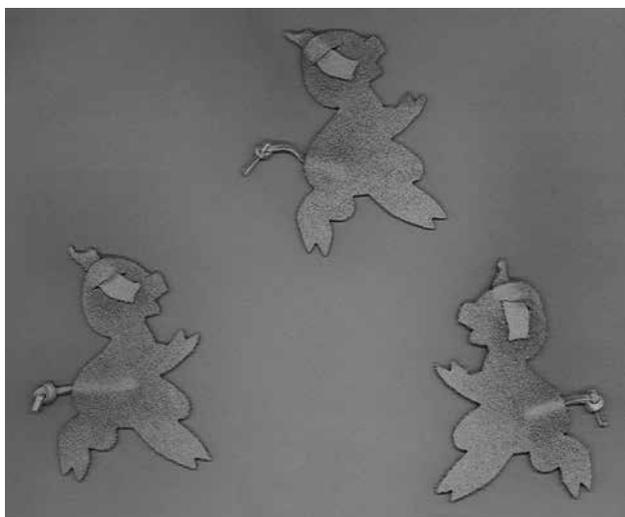
book no longer means proposing a story to educate, to teach something or to show a virtuous example, it rather means offering an instrument for fantastic, physical and interior exploration.

Bruno Bettelheim said that "For a story to really capture a child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to be able to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination, help him to develop his intellect and clarify his emotions, put him in tune with his anxieties and hopes, fully recognise his difficulties, and at the same time suggest solutions to the problems that trouble him" (Bettelheim, 1978).

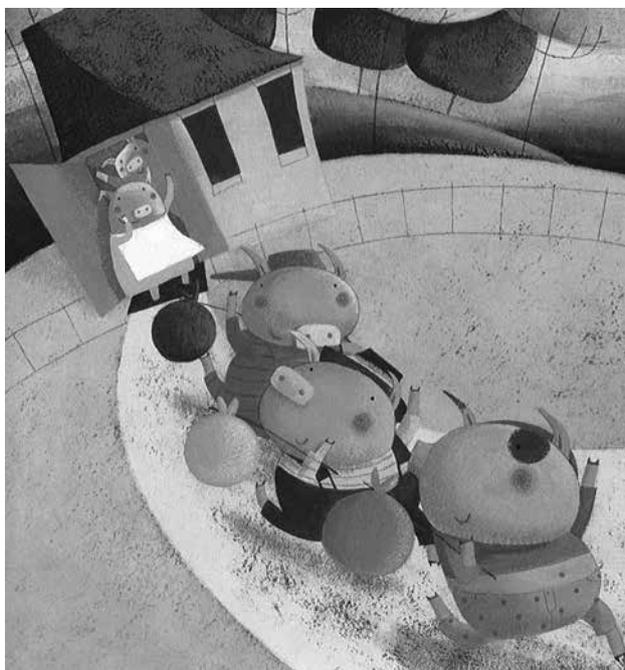
All children are exposed to the society surrounding them, reality is often disconcerting, children have to learn to find their way in life using their own resources, but must be helped to find a meaning and a name for their emotions, they need ideas on how to set up their own "interior home". Bettelheim wanted to understand why children loved popular fairy tales so much, and found out that it was because they started at the point in which the children found themselves, psychologically and emotionally. Fairy tales talk of children's interior pressures in a way which, unconsciously, the child understands, and they offer examples of solutions to these difficulties. It is with narration and within narra-



Wolf running off with a burning tail (Guarnaccia)



Three little pigs (Dufresne)



Three little pigs (Di Chiara)

tion that life is composed, decomposed, mixed up and put back into order: stories symbolically represent life and give it meaning. Reading a book again to find oneself along the path, opening the book again to see if the pictures are still there. To see if the characters, and their homes, are still there. Luckily books can be closed and opened again, to start again... learning to manage emotions and feelings is not easy.

The story of the three little pigs therefore seemed to me to be the most suitable for my research: firstly, to talk to the children about the earthquake subconsciously – I didn't want to talk to them explicitly about it as the matter had already been handled in the family, during the first few days at school education, every day during the past few months before

returning to school, and also to tone down the precarious situation of certain issues; secondly, to make the children responsible using a fairy tale talking about "houses falling down", and present them with images of houses which fall down but which do not hurt the characters.

There are many editions of this story, with very different images in terms of size, colours and drawing styles.

Bettelheim stated that today children know only the most sweetened and simplified versions of traditional fairy tales, so their meaning is diminished, the most profound significances are removed. Parents are often convinced that children must be presented only with pleasing images which are able to meet their wishes, but the message presented in fairy tales is often to the contrary, that fighting against the serious difficulties in life is inevitable and only those who stand up to them can be victorious.

### A tale in four picture books

To carry out my project, I had to read and look at many illustrated editions of the story of the three little pigs. During my research, I was rather perplexed, as I had decided to use four books which told the story in a similar way but which had different figures. Going to many bookshops and libraries, I discovered that most of the editions of the story available offered the most sweetened versions of the story, I found the original fairy tale in which the wolf eats the first two pigs in only one edition, and only a few which described to wolf's attempts to eat the third pig by trying to trick him into coming out of the house while the other two remained safely within the brick walls.

I focused my attention on the "tame" version of the fairy tale and selected four picture books with fairly different imagery:

- "I tre porcellini" illustrated by Steven Guarnaccia, Ed. Corraini (2009): set among the houses of great 20<sup>th</sup> century architects. Frank Gehry, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright are the lead characters of this contemporary story. Three great 20<sup>th</sup> century architects personify the three pigs, building houses with scrap, glass and plaster and bricks. The wolf comes and blows down the house of the laziest pigs hiding in the house of bricks. The illustrations have precise strokes, clear and harmonious colours. It is a classic reinterpreted through the eyes of the architect and the designer.
- "I tre porcellini" illustrated by Didier Dufresne, Ed. Les Doights Qui Revent (1997): this picture book is designed for blind children, the pictures are in relief and created with different materials. The story is also written in braille. Some illustrations are very simple and easy to understand, for example the houses, the wolf, the pigs, the wolf falling into the



“Allora soffiò e risoffiò, finché farà crollare la tua casa!”  
rispose il lupo furibondo. E subito soffiò e risoffiò, e in effetti  
la capanna volò via. Nel frattempo, il porcellino era scappato  
più veloce che poteva.

The wolf blowing down the straw house (Bernadette)

cooking pot, with moving parts: doors, windows and the wolf's mouth. Other parts are not so easy to understand, such as the small fragments of the straw and wood houses which remain after the wolf has huffed and puffed, the wolf's tail, which is the only tangible element when the wolf appears down the chimney or when he runs away. The pages are extremely delicate, as they are made from light cardboard bound with a metal spiral.

- “I tre porcellini” illustrated by Francesca Di Chiara, Ed. Fabbri (2005): this has very bright, attractive colours, but often only parts of the images are shown and the main characters are not in the foreground. For example, the straw house is not in the centre of the page and in the foreground we see the pig fishing; or when the pigs light the fire they are in the background compared to the logs in the hearth, we see only the roof of the brick house. This edition comes with an audio CD, but which I did not take into consideration.
- “I tre porcellini” illustrated by Bernadette, Ed. Nord-Sud (2011): this has very naturalistic illustrations and characteristics which recall the search for authenticity, very rich details and soft colours. The images look like watercolours, the outlines are not well defined, on each page we get lost looking at every minutely drawn detail.

Having chosen these four editions, all quite different in terms of illustrative style, I selected some images (those which I considered most important for the reconstruction of the story) for each book. I chose ten images for each picture book, scanned them and printed them so that they all had the same format, to avoid the risk of the different sizes influencing the children's attention. Finally, I plastic-coated them to make them more resistant in the children's hands.

The chosen images portray:

- the pigs saying goodbye to their mother,
- the first pig building the straw house,
- the second pig building the wooden house,
- the third pig building the brick house,
- the wolf blowing away the straw house,
- the wolf blowing away the wooden house,
- the wolf blowing on the brick house,
- the wolf climbing up the chimney,
- the wolf falling into the cooking pot or the fire,
- the wolf running away.

### The results of the observations

For my research, which was conducted in the parish nursery school in Massa Finalese (a hamlet in Finale Emilia), I chose a group of children based on the information concerning the profession and level of

education of their parents, including both boys and girls. The work I carried out therefore considered both gender differences and the socio-cultural differences of their backgrounds.

With the help of my colleagues, I decided to conduct the project in the mixed class of four and five year olds, with twenty seven children but an average attendance of twenty children. I chose nine four and five year olds, five boys and four girls, divided according to the socio-cultural level of their parents.

As a medium-high socio-cultural variable I privileged the mother's level of education, presuming that a high qualification, preferably that of the mother, would correspond to a higher linguistic and cognitive level in children of this age bracket.

The work was divided into two parts: the first phase involved reading the stories to two groups of ten children, the second phase with individual children. Both phases were recorded on video.

During the first phase, the story of the three little pigs was read to the children, and only thereafter the children were shown the books and were able to look through them freely and interact with each other. I then asked them to tell the story and asked each one which book they preferred. The second phase was carried out a few days later, focusing on each child in the selected group individually. In a separate room I asked each one to choose the pages of their favourite picture book and to order them, telling me the story of the three little pigs.

### *The children's preferences*

Processing the data collected, observing the different preferences of the children in relation to the books presented, I obtained table 1.

During the group readings, the children preferred to look at and play with Dufresne's book. My opinion in this sense is that the book is very simple, and has moving parts. Often at nursery school this kind of book is presented to younger children, but the older children also enjoy touching them and seeing

how the parts open and close, and what is hidden behind them.

Dufresne's book, which was initially fought over, was not however chosen in the preferences, with the exception of only one girl in the group. Perhaps initially these pictures capture the children's attention above all for the moving parts, but probably the interest fades after having opened and closed the doors, windows and the wolf's mouth a couple of times, as effectively the pictures are very simple and are perhaps more suited to younger children. Bernadette's illustrated book aroused little interest, perhaps due to its soft colours and details which are not always noted.

Di Chiara's illustrated text captured much attention as soon as it was presented, perhaps due to its bright colours, but was later not considered successful, I think partly because the images are fairly abstract, only some details of the houses are shown and the images recall a possible different story (for example in the picture presenting the first pig, in the foreground the pig is fishing and the straw house can be seen, tiny, in the background), probably the details added in the pictures distract from the story told and it is therefore also a little more difficult to understand: looking through the book on their own, some children asked what a given illustration represented. As can be clearly seen in the table, for the second phase of the research, the majority of children in the group chose to tell the story using the images from Guarnaccia's book. The reasons for this preference were: the pigs were bigger, the wolf with the motorbike and the glasses, the different materials the houses were built with.

In my opinion, Guarnaccia's book captured the children's attention as the images are different from the classic pictures of this story, both concerning the portrayal of the pigs and the wolf, the different materials used for the houses, which remained very much set in the children's memory. The children were impressed with the wolf wearing glasses and a jacket who arrives on a motorbike. Some images were cho-

Table 1 – THE CHILDREN'S PREFERENCES

		Children	Di Chiara	Dufresne	Guarnaccia	Bernadette
Medium-high Socio-Cultural Level	Boys	Gregorio			X	
		Simone			X	
	Girls	Giorgia				X
		Frida			X	
Medium-low Socio-Cultural Level	Boys	Andrea			X	
		Mattia			X	
		Matteo			X	
	Girls	Giulia			X	
		Victoria	X			



Wolf (Di Chiara)



Straw house (Di Chiara)

sen more than once, those which the children could remember more easily and which helped them more when they had to reconstruct the story.

#### *Children's ability and the socio-cultural level of the family*

Let's consider the differences emerging according to the socio-cultural level of the children's parents. From the following table it can be seen that some children needed help in reconstructing the story through the pictures. The majority of the children with parents with a medium-low socio-cultural level needed help (in narrating the story, in reconstructing the story using the pictures), while the children with parents with a medium-high socio-cultural level were more able to tell and reconstruct the story using the pictures.

The children's age also affected their work, as Mattia and Frida, two children aged four, needed a little more help, but mainly in telling the story, while they managed to arrange the pictures on their own.

The difference in gender also showed that the girls, even with a medium-low socio-cultural level, had a more articulated and fluid language compared to the boys in the same social class, table 2.

#### **Final considerations**

Generally speaking, in carrying out this research I noted that the substantial difference between the children belonging to the two different socio-cultural levels lies in the language used and not in the understanding of the images or the story telling.

Overall all the children showed interest in the activ-

Table 2 – RECONSTRUCTION OF THE STORY

			With help	Without help	Time taken for the reconstruction
Boys	Gregorio	Medium-high level		X	3,02 minutes
	Simone		X		4,45 minutes
Girls	Giorgia			X	1,40 minutes
	Frida		X		6,12 minutes
Boys	Andrea	Medium-low level	X		3,03 minutes
	Mattia		X		4,20 minutes
	Matteo			X	3,07 minutes
Girls	Giulia		X		3,10 minutes
	Victoria			X	5,23 minutes

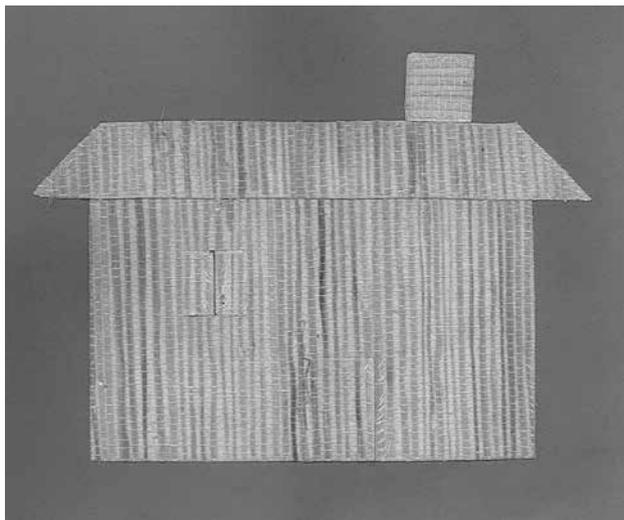
ity proposed, participating actively in both the reading session and subsequently when they could use the books by themselves, and when reconstructing the story using the pictures.

I believe that the socio-cultural level of the parents affects the way in which the children look at and listen to stories; probably the children of parents with a medium-high socio-cultural level have more dealings with books and images, possibly their parents use a more articulated language with them and this offers them a broader vocabulary.

I noted how the girls, who usually prefer less “moving” activities compared to boys, are more willing to listen to stories and look at pictures, and for this reason perhaps they needed less help when reconstructing the story.

The imagery in picture books fosters verbalisation in all children, it catalyses language, when the children looked at the pictures they were stimulated to describe them and this helped them to remember all or part of the story; looking at and describing the images, they were then able to completely reconstruct the story. Clearly the greater the command of language, the more articulated the description of both the pictures and telling the story. All the children were in any case able, with a varying range of difficulty, to reconstruct the story using the pictures; my questions were very simple, leaving more room for their spontaneous storytelling. As can be seen in table 2, the reconstruction of the story using the pictures showed how illustrations help to remember the story, at times even using the exact words the children remembered from the story.

It was in any case fun to see how, in some cases, the children remembered my way of telling the story, repeating my words with the same tone of voice. It also emerged that when the children understand the images they are able to repeat the story better.



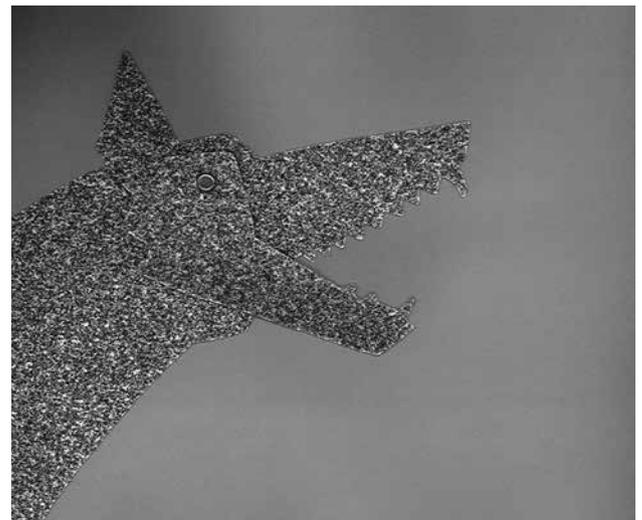
Straw house (Dufresne)

When the images are too abstract and not easily comprehensible, some tend to add invented details to the story, starting from the details in the picture. From table 2 it also emerges that the four year old children took more time to reconstruct the story using the images than the five year olds, who, whatever the socio-cultural level of their parents, took more or less the same time.

Some girls took longer as they described the pictures in more detail. As regards the issue of the house, I noted that the children were not particularly disturbed by the fact that the straw house and the wooden house were blown down by the wolf. Only one child told me and his classmates that the brick house cannot be blown down by the wolf, but can fall down in an earthquake. Reading the text in an ironical key allowed the children to have fun imitating the wolf blowing on the houses, and perhaps having chosen the least cruel version, the one in which all three pigs are saved, meant that the attention was focused only on the fairy tale itself, leaving aside the implicit references to the earthquake and the houses falling down.

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Wolf (Dufresne)

Fabiola Crudeli, Francesca Casadei

## Natural elements for developing scientific experience\*

**Fabiola Crudeli** *Psychology and Education Coordinator for the 0-6 Childcare Services for the municipalities of Forlimpopoli, Meldola, Bertinoro, Castrocaro Terme and Terra del Sole (FC)*

**Francesca Casadei** *Psychology Trainee, Department of Psychology, University of Bologna, Cesena campus*

The 0/6 Project “Natural Elements and Atmospheric Agents” (2013-2016) run in the nurseries and pre-schools in the municipalities of Forlimpopoli, Bertinoro, Castrocaro Terme and Meldola, aimed to help the children and teachers discover the natural elements (Water, Air, Earth, Fire) and atmospheric agents (Sun, Wind, Clouds and Rain).

The Project was part of a broader programme called “Natural elements as a pretext for the development of areas of experience”, continuing on the consolidated practice of *Outdoor Education* introduced in the local municipalities from 2010.

The programme was structured into three phases: an initial theory phase of teacher training, aiming to broaden their existing knowledge; a second “experimental” phase working with the children in the nurseries and preschools, proposing a range of workshop activities with the help of Riccardo Raggi, environmental guide and excursionist, which is the main focus of this article, and finally, a third phase focusing on training with the parents, run by the pedagogical coordinators. Underlying the Project, in addition to acquiring knowledge of the natural elements surrounding us, are the principles of *outdoor learning*, understood as a method of experiential learning exploiting the advantages offered by direct learning. The spirit of outdoor learning is the central focus of the workshops, in which not only do the children have contact with nature (the workshops were held in the nursery and preschool gardens), but in which learning is an active process, oriented to action, with the direct participation and interest of the children.

Moreover: through contact with the outdoor environment, children enjoy the many benefits which are now recognised not only in terms of (physical and mental) health but also in terms of the more specifically psychological aspects, including development

of tolerance towards frustration, hope for the future and creative thought.

Another and equally important aspect promoted by contact with the natural environment is certainly the possibility to develop greater sensitivity towards nature and the environment that surrounds us.

The outdoor environment as a fundamental resource for mental and physical well-being had already been hypothesised by Rousseau (1712-1778), who stated that the countryside was the ideal place for learning, and this concept was also returned to by Dewey (1859-1952) within the field of educational activism.

Outdoor educational activity is considered an expressive way of learning that fosters psychomotor development and mental health in children, combining theory and practice, body and mind (Anders Szczepanski, 1998).

The principle of co-discovery is the heart of the workshops: all learning is a combined conquest, the result of shared thought. A fundamental concept in psycho-pedagogical terms was introduced by Vygotskij’s *Zone of proximal development* (ZPD): in workshop activities, children learn through the help of the competent adult, who “covers” the distance between the child’s effective and potential development, posing questions of a higher level than the skills possessed by the child, who, to answer them, must use all his resources. This is what happens during the workshops: the expert sets some questions for the children and provides them with some of the tools for answering them: the children then test out a series of thoughts, and through a process of discussion with their peers and guided by the adult are then able to offer original and reliable answers.

It is precisely through this phenomenon that, during the workshops, it is possible to record the children’s “naive” (as Piaget would say) reasoning and theories: in fact, they try to offer explanations to natural phenomena by filling in the knowledge they already possess, through surprising and original thought processes.

### Organisation of the workshops

Three workshops were run during the school year 2013/2014, each focusing on a particular element: The Sun and Sunlight, Air and Wind, Clouds and

\* Nomination for the award “Best Nursery school Project “Infanzia - Piccolo Plauto 2015”.

Rain. Each workshop designed for the *classes* was structured into an initial introductory and theoretical part, in which, using an inductive method, the children discovered and studied the topic in question; every explanation, presented in a broadly interactive manner, left ample room for the questions and comments from the children, who, having the possibility to learn directly thanks to the demonstrations offered by a series of scientific instruments (the prism for dividing the colours sunlight is made of, the Newton disc for recomposing the colour of light, a globe...) can participate actively. The second part of each workshop on the other hand involved the joint construction of a scientific instrument (a sundial for the sun workshop, a wind vane for measuring the strength of the wind, a rain meter to measure the rainfall) that the children built both to take home and to keep in the class, in order to consult them at any time.

Each workshop was designed as a group activity, in which groups of 7-10 children had the possibility to interact with the expert and among themselves, to maximise all opportunities for experiential learning.

The workshops, run with the children of both the nurseries and the preschools, differed in the methods and contents according to the age group: while for the nursery children (aged around 24 months) a short explanation of the activity (atmospheric agent) was offered and followed by a larger practical component, for the older children the explanation was more detailed and scientific.

### Let's throw light on light (1st outdoor scientific education workshop)

*The seven colours of the rainbow  
make up the light, but you can't even see them:  
there's green, yellow, blue  
which is perfect, there's purple and red,  
orange and violet.  
If you look at the light it seems white you know  
the fact that it's coloured you would never know  
but if the rain in the sky hits a  
ray of sunshine then seven  
coloured strips will appear.*

Taken from song I, seven colours of the rainbow,  
by Piero Galli

#### The box

One of the first instruments presented to the children in the sunlight workshop was a simple cardboard box with a hole through which the children had to "look", like looking through a keyhole: at the start the box was closed, so the children could see nothing other than the dark; afterwards the children looked through the hole with the box open, and could see the sunlight drawn on the inner surface of the box.

This was possible because the light filtered inside the open box.

The box was shown to all the children one by one, and afterwards they said what they saw inside the mysterious container: "I can only see the dark"; "I can see a little light"; "We couldn't see anything (inside the box) because it's empty"; "There's a fly in the box"; "Inside the box I could see a dot"; "You can't see anything because it's too dark!"; "There's a shiny coin inside the box"; "I saw the rainbow inside the box!"; "There wasn't anything in the box, just the DARK"... and here's the magic word... *the dark!*... How can we explain the light without starting from the dark?!

#### Galileo vs Copernicus

The expert Riccardo Raggi used a globe to show the older children the revolving and rotating movements of the planet Earth: a torch embellished by a nice cardboard sun represented the Sun, the areas of shadow and light projected on the globe indicated the day and night on our planet. And then came the question: what turns, the Sun or the Earth?! "The Sun turns slowly and then goes down on the earth"; "When it's daytime in one country its night time in another"; "The earth turns because the wind blows and moves it"; "When the sun turns the dark comes and we go to bed"; "We see the sun at the top first and then at the bottom, because there are 400 of them!"; "It's the sky that moves!"; "The wind blows and moves the sun"; "The sun is still like a statue"; "The sun is a fire star"... During the workshops the older children offered a number of divergent theories: some said it was the sun that moved and others replied that the planet Earth rotates on its own axis, leading to an authentic cultural debate following that which, in our imagination, could have been between Galileo and Copernicus.

#### The revelation: the true identity of sunlight

One of the most popular scientific instruments used by the children was the prism: with this "magic" object, Riccardo Raggi showed them the true identity of light which, against the expectations of all, is not at all yellow, white or orange, but composed of a series of seven colours: the colours of the rainbow. So... how is the rainbow formed?! "There's treasure at the end of the rainbow!"; "The rainbow comes out because the sun reflects the drops of water that remain on the leaves and on the grass after the rain"; "When the rain ends and the sun comes, after that the rainbow comes..." this mystery is explained too: the sunlight reflects in the drops of water vapour left in the air by the rain, each one acts like a small prism which decomposes the light into all its components.



### Trapped light

Riccardo Raggi proposed a game for the younger children at the nursery: try to catch the light projected by the prism. The children really enjoyed themselves, their little hands moved enthusiastically trying again and again to grasp the band of colour, but with no luck: even the youngest children realised it was an impossible task, while the older ones looked for plausible explanations: *“It’s no good, you can’t catch the sunlight”*; *“I know why you can’t catch the light... it goes over your hand!”*; *“We can’t capture the light, it’s a reflection”*.

### Colour magic tricks

Riccardo Raggi also brought two strange, coloured objects: these are Newton discs, simple instruments which produce the inverse effect to that of the prism: while the prism is used to decompose light into its parts, the Newton disc is used to “recompose” the light: all seven colours of the rainbow are found on the disc, and when it is rotated like a spinning top we can see that by mixing all the colours, the colour white appears, which is the colour of light as we normally perceive it. The children were fascinated by this demonstration, and the expert offered them other ideas: if the disc doesn’t have all the colours of the rainbow, what we see is no longer white light but another colour: for example, green comes from yellow and blue; blue and red make purple... The children are not new to this idea: many of them have already

experimented primary colours and their derivatives in the class, and it is a great opportunity to reconcile the knowledge learned in class and that discovered using these scientific instruments.

### Time leaves its mark

Thanks to the sundial Riccardo Raggi brought with him, we also found that passing time leaves its mark: the pebble placed on the shadow projected by the sundial at the start of the workshop is no longer on the edge of the shadow but in the middle: this is the sign that the Earth has moved. And in this way we discovered, without using a clock, when it’s time to go and eat: building a sundial is a great way for finding our way in time. Just a few items and the sundial is ready: a piece of card, a pencil, a straw and some sticky tape. Now even the younger children can understand what time of day it is.

Outdoor education stimulates all five fields of experience: that of the self and of others, through processes of dialogue with both adults and peers, group work and cooperation, respect for others; the body and movement, a benefit which can certainly be offered by the environment outside the class; images, sounds, colours, involved in the workshop activities; discussions and words, skills used during the activities requiring dialogue with others and the development of personal ideas, as well as the acquisition of new words and the widening of the vocabulary; knowledge of the world, which is active in every workshop, as every child touches, looks and listens, handles, processes, comments, identifies connections, negotiates the solution to problems with the others.

Thus the workshops are configured as a direct learning method, useful for developing important cognitive and attractive skills; the initiative of carrying out the activities in direct contact with the outside environment seeks to return to living the space outside the classroom differently, it can (and must) be rethought, not only as a place of leisure but also of learning: a kind of decentralised class room, a place which, with the due attention, can be enjoyed in every season; a place that has much more to teach us and offer us than we might imagine.

### Air and wind: 2<sup>nd</sup> outdoor scientific education workshop

*L’aria*

*L’aria l’e cla roba lizira*

*che sta dalonda la tu testa*

*e la dventa piò céra quand che t’roid*

*The air is that light thing,*

*that hangs around your head*

*and becomes clearer when you laugh.*

(Tonino Guerra)

You can't see the air but you can feel it, it's a poetic matter. The air animates things in the world and becomes visible as a mysterious force. The topic covered in this second workshop cannot be seen or touched, but there is a way of getting to know it: listening to the noise! Air takes on an identity before our eyes only when it comes into contact with something: a tree blowing in the wind, a hat blown away, a bird soaring above us, a breeze, a kite. It is thus with the noise of a wind blowing suddenly that this workshop is opened: The Air and the Wind.

Wind is composed of air.. and where is air? "Air is up in the sky!", "Air blows in the leaves on the trees", "Air is what makes the clouds move!", "The air is in the cloud...". And is air perhaps not nearer to us? Inside us? And here the children remember that air is also fundamental for our survival, and so it must be everywhere. It's as if we were immersed in a sea of air!

Does anyone know if air has a weight? "Air has no weight"; "It weighs a bit, but not much"... And can you collect it? "... You can collect air! Look, I just tried, but it escaped through my fingers". To do this, the expert Riccardo Raggi proposed a simple experiment to the children: all you need is two balloons and some air-weighing scales. There are two deflated balloons tied to a stick (our scales); the expert shows that the stick is perfectly straight, because the balloons have exactly the same weight. What happens if we blow one of them up? If the stick hangs towards the inflated balloon, then this is the proof that air has weight. If the stick remains straight, then there is no difference in weight between the inflated and deflated balloon, demonstrating that air has no weight. Riccardo Raggi blows up the balloon, and amidst an air of suspense, lets go of the scales... and the stick hangs down on the side of the inflated balloon! The "litmus test" is also provided by the fact that, blowing up the balloon hanging from the scales slowly, the stick leans gradually to one side, proportionally. So air has its own weight, even if we can't feel it...

### *Hot air and cold air*

But not all air has the same weight: hot air is lighter than cold air, and this property makes it move upwards. The expert prepared another experiment to demonstrate this phenomenon perfectly. All you need is a plastic bottle, a balloon to fit on the neck of the bottle in place of the cap and a pan of boiling water. Even though it is closed, the bottle is full of air, just like everything else. If the air in the bottle is heated, it rises, and we can see the balloon on the top of the bottle being inflated. If the bottle is left to cool down, the balloon deflates immediately, and is completely emptied. The different weights of hot air (light) and cold air (heavy) create a continuous movement... this movement of masses of air is what originates the

wind! The expert uses a series of polystyrene cubes with coloured arrows that clearly show the movement of air generating the wind: the warm air rises and as it rises it cools; when the cold air gets to the top, however, it is heavy, so it comes down again, becoming hot air again and rising again... in an infinite cycle. That's how wind is made! *"The wind is like a clock, it never stops!"*.

### *Breeze or hurricane? Blow and I'll tell you which wind you are...*

Not all wind is the same... the wind may blow light, it may blow strong, sometimes it can even damage trees and houses, when its becomes a hurricane. To measure the strength of the wind we can use an instrument which we could compare to the thermometer we use to measure our temperature: this instrument is called an anemometer. And so the expert took a beautiful anemometer out of his case of experiments, and this has a white lever that indicates the strength of the wind. A small cloud shows a weak wind; a medium-sized cloud is the symbol of a fairly strong wind and a large cloud indicates a very strong wind. Who wants to try and blow?!

### *Around the world in... 8 winds*

Winds do not only differ in their strength... a fairly simple way of recognising them is to understand where they come from. To do this we use a compass rose, which indicates all the places the winds may come from. We can identify eight different winds: the four main winds, which come from the relative cardinal points (North, East, South, West), and the other four winds, coming from the intermediate positions (North-East, South-East, South-West and North-West). The expert used some very entertaining anthropomorphic representations of each wind to introduce them to the children: a kind of photograph showing the main characteristics of each one:

- Tramontane (North): cold, dry wind, with a scarf and hat.
- Ostro (South): weak, warm wind, with a tired face.
- Levante (East): wind that blows from where the sun comes up, with an alarm clock and the rising sun.
- Ponente (West): wind that blows from where the sun sets, blowing out a candle, wearing a nightcap with the moon in the background.
- Maestro (North-West): cold, snowy wind, with gloves, earmuffs and snowflakes.
- Scirocco (South-East): hot, dry wind, with a sunhat and sunglasses.
- Libeccio (South-East): hot, humid wind, that brings rain, with sweat drops and falling rain.
- Grecale (North-East): impetuous, cold wind, which brings storms, with an angry face.

### Clouds and rain: 3rd outdoor scientific education workshop

*Every cloud engenders not a storm.*

William Shakespeare, Henry VI, 1592.

The topic of the third and last workshop run during the school year focused on Clouds and Rain. The workshop began in the usual manner, at least apparently: the children were invited to close their eyes and listen to a noise (rain beating down in a downpour), accompanied however with the great surprise of an unexpected spray of water on their face. And so the children immediately understood what the topic was: rain!

#### *Clouds for all tastes*

First of all, the expert showed the older children the different types of clouds we can see in the sky... we can recognise a dozen different types, distinct from each other according to their shape, as the height at which the clouds lie cannot easily be understood just by looking if you are not an expert. There are all sorts: cirrus clouds, for example, are curly (*"They're curly like my hair!"*); cumulonimbus clouds are huge and often bring rain and storms; stratus clouds, and many others. And there's another difference we can see with the naked eye: the colour of the clouds! This also helps us to see whether it may rain or not:

while white clouds are just passing through, the grey ones are filled with rain, and this is why they take on this colour: due to the quantity of water droplets they contain, the sunlight cannot filter through them, and so they seem darker... *"The clouds are grey because they're full of water"*.

#### *Story of a drop of water*

How do clouds form? The expert explained to the (younger and older) children that three ingredients are needed to form a cloud: hot water, wind and... dust! Part of the work is carried out by an element we already came across in the first workshop, the sun: this is responsible for heating large surfaces of water (the sea, lakes, rivers...) the droplets of which, once heated, tend to spread out (lowering their density) and become lighter... it is at this point that another known atmospheric agent, which we met during the second workshop, comes into play: this time it is Wind, but a special wind: hot wind. As this wind, which is light, rises upwards, it carries with it all the drops of water that had been heated before, carrying them far upwards. At this point, when the droplets of water have reached very high up, they are then cooled down again, and as they cool down they start to move closer and closer together. But in the sky they have nothing to hang onto... apart from small grains of dust



(that third special ingredient) which continuously travel through our atmosphere. These tiny grains of dust represent the anchor for these droplets dispersed high up in the sky, and once they cling onto the dust then clouds are formed.

### *Cloud in a jar*

The expert proposed to the children to make a cloud. Yes, that's right, make one! To do this he used: boiling water, heated on a gas stove, ice to create the cold air, a lit match, to generate a tiny quantity of dust. And in a very short time, through the glass of the jar we start to see a tiny vortex of air run through the now known cycle: the wind cycle. This movement of air slowly starts to take on the appearance of a cloud, becoming more white and visible. When we open the jar, we can make the cloud come out, and it is free to rise up in the sky with the others.

### *Clouds and rain*

And what if our cloud wanted to rain? Why does it rain sometimes? Why don't all clouds bring rain? And so the expert pulled out a piece of cotton wool from his case of experiments, which in the child's imagination looked just like a cloud, and began to spray water on it. At the start, for a while, the water is absorbed and held inside the cotton wool ball, just as happens with clouds. We start to see some drops falling only after a little while, when the water starts to become really too much. "The water falls because there's too much!" Thus another mystery is revealed: the clouds that carry rain have collected such a large number of water droplets that they can't hold them in any longer; this is why they fall out, and it starts to rain.

### *Every type of weather has its clothes*

All this knowledge made the children tiny weather experts... but only the best meteorologists know how to dress according to the weather! Who wants to help Riccardo Raggi's friend Tina mouse to get dressed? This little mouse is a little scatter-brained, and never knows what to wear... and so sometimes she goes out in her pants and vest. Her wardrobe is packed, though... What should Tina mouse wear on a sunny summer's day? Or if it's raining hard? And if she wanted to go out and make a snowman in the middle of a snow storm? Or while the wind is moving the branches in the trees, to try out her new kite... So, in turn, the children chose the most suitable clothes for the weather from Tina's wardrobe: t-shirt and shorts for a sunny day, a raincoat and hat for the rain, a warm coat and scarf, gloves and woollen hat for playing in the snow, and nice jacket and a pair of jeans when the wind is blowing.

### *The weather station*

This time too, our young scientists and their teachers are given a weather forecaster's task: to build a rain meter, to complete the very reliable weather station and its sundial, wind vane with a brightly coloured compass rose, and in a few days' time a rain meter too, to measure the rainfall. Now the school garden has everything it needs!

### **Conclusions**

The workshops were designed as a space and time for developing the attention of the younger children on the surrounding environment, particularly the atmospheric agents, starting with small experiments, and then discovering and experimenting new instruments and educational approaches. These were inputs for the different groups of children: each class then investigated a specific aspect, creating a narrative context used by the teachers to achieve the project objectives defined in the areas of experience.

Moreover, the workshops were carried out only outdoors, and were an opportunity for the teachers and children to experiment the beauty and usefulness of considering the garden as a unique, decentralised class room for experiential learning. The outdoor environment, a source of many learning possibilities, not only fosters personal well-being (by stimulating movement), but also develops important affective, emotional and cognitive skills, parallel to the sense of care and respect for nature.

A space to be experimented even with younger nursery children, constituting a very important opportunity for learning, for the development of attention skills, and for the pleasure and curiosity of discovery (stupor).

Last but not least, we need to underline the effort of coordinating, supporting and nourishing the 20 local public and private nursery services and pre-schools taking part in this innovative project, which required a constant pedagogical presence for support and liaison. The Project has aroused much interest from parents and children, and the teachers are involved in a pedagogical process of change, concerning the inclusion of new educational practices, based on what today is defined as outdoor education.

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Fabio Comunello

## The hole in the earth

*Fabio Comunello Founder of the "Conca d'Oro" organic farm cooperative in Bassano del Grappa (Vicenza)*

Here the element earth is very structured: a hillock with an empty space inside, linked to the outside with an opening at the top and two at the base.

This earth structure embodies two basic topological concepts of human perception and culture: inside and outside. There is a cavity in the earth which is made of earth and there is an external space which counterposes it.

The relationship between inside and outside is given by the opening, but it is principally given by the body of the child experimenting both dimensions, filled with meanings that escape this topology to become part of the semantic universe of emotions, even before the concept of learning which is also implicit here.

The earth seems to play only a supporting role, the background of the void inside which plays the key role in this situation, the child's privileged interlocutor due to the fact that, by demarcating the void, it allows it to exist. The same game of solid and void, inside and outside, could also be played with other materials (large boxes which are sometimes used in preschools, or concrete pipes like those seen in playgrounds) but the fact that this is a pile of earth gives the inside/outside opposition a series of sensory and emotional connotations, indeed a mythical sense which cannot be found with other materials.

Moreover, the sensory, tactile, thermal differences, the irregularity of the shape convey a much greater mass of information compared to other materials, enhancing and corroborating the child's imagination.

Returning to the conceptual units of "inside" and "outside", we focus once more on their properties, because these are even more pertinent to the possible interpretations of the photographic sequence.

They exist because each one is perceived and identified as the opposite of the other: they constitute a first, archaic subdivision of space but at the same time are a recurrent motif of common language and thought.

In terms of perception and experience, "inside" belongs to the experience of the contained entity which exists only because something is contained, otherwise the contents have no meaning. This perception of incorporation of the contents is defined by the happy expression "immersed". A distinguishing

feature of "inside" is that of containment, incorporation, therefore with a non-mediated contact between container and contents, with positive echoes (protection) or, the contrary, negative echoes (closure).

Being "inside" also means hiding, being out of sight of the other, and as sight is considered one of the privileged channels for perceiving reality, not being seen connotes "not existing". All games, for both children and adults, are based on this idea of being and not being, hiding and seeking, playing cuckoo in courting and seduction. All games functional to the establishment and/or strengthening of identity.

Above all in western cultures, "inside" is run through with fractures: a desired space (when we are far from home) or rejected space (when we have been indoors for too long); a protective space (for an adolescent closed in their bedroom which is off limits for everyone, above all the parents!) or a limiting space (for an adolescent seeking independence who needs to discover new spaces).

While containment and incorporation connote shelter, safety, then it is possible that those inside are perceived as "needing safety", therefore "weak", "passive", "dependent", and immature, all characteristics of (human and animal) cubs.

The opposite of the small "inside" is the "big" "outside".

"Fuori", the Italian word for outside, in its etymological root (fora), indicates the door that leads outside. And therefore another space, virtually unlimited, towards which human actions and instruments are directed, which can be explored only through the intentional movement of the body or its extensions (instruments).

Among the properties of the "big" we may include the "important", the "adult", characterised by "independence" and "maturity".

When in common language we use "big" to define adults, we take the child as a unit of measure, according to the oppositional pair of adult/child. According to this opposition, an inherent trait of the adult is "power", the ability and possibility to propose themselves and projects, implementing the strategies to achieve them, consequently manipulating reality and the growth of experience and therefore knowledge.

Counterposed to all this, "outside" may connote distance, separation, in both physical and affective terms, which in turn may generate another path because the passage through the door may take on the value of "banishment", "abandonment", "exclusion".

The contradiction is clear; here it is the “outside” which is identified as an empty space, a place of exile, of “non-knowledge”, of “absence”, and “lack”.

Playing hide and seek, it is precisely the absence of the child (however short-lived and even precarious) which must make the parents worry, make them show that they desire the child by seeking him insistently. That search for the absent *par excellence!* It must be clearly connoted by sadness, anxiety, worry, so that, skilfully graduating the timing of the action, the moment of discovery and reconstitution of presence and identification is filled with joy.



In narrative and temporal terms, the events of the sequence alternate between the solid and void present in the structure.

We can suppose that what is recorded in the photos is a phase (the exploitation) of a passage from a first moment, in which the holes were dug (construction) and a second moment, in which, we suppose, it will all be broken down (destruction).

Although we cannot know how the construction phase was developed, it is difficult to think that the child was able to dig such holes alone, so we can hypothesise that it was the work of an adult who, as in other stories, permitted and promoted the experience.

The moment of destruction is completely hypothetical: we will never know if, at the end of the game, the child really destroyed the structure, but experience teaches us that it is highly probable.

Reading the events, the child starts from the top of the pile of earth, his head bent forwards, and we can imagine he is observing the space below.

The main relationship captured in the image is that of above/below. The child's posture informs us of the presence of a hole below but at the same time clarifies that the above/below relationship does not concern the body-pile of earth relationship but rather that of the body-hole in the earth.

The space demarcated by the arms, the body slightly curved and the legs, is almost the mirror image of the hole below him. This could make us think of a kind of rather archaic measuring of the empty

space made through the child's own body. A little like what a child does when he wants to show the others how much he loves his parents: he opens his arms as wide as is physically possible for him to show with his body, even though he knows that it is an impossible quantification.

The child's posture is well balanced, resting on his hands and forefeet. In the position of the arms, the point of force given by the knee joint and the position of the feet, we can see a potential dynamism which seems to exclude any fear.

It is a starting posture: beneath, there is something to observe, explore and understand, because the volume is developed downwards.

If however we configure this as a waiting phase, we can see an upturning of the semantic values. That “inside” (the hole in the earth) is still to be explored and known, and it could therefore be considered extraneous and worrying. This hypothesis is supported by some data: the small size of the hole, for which the idea of being contained can easily infer constriction; the experience of depth is certainly not very familiar.

In any case, it seems the metaphor of the ambivalent experience of “inside” and the dialectic of emotions and feelings underlying this: trust/fear, pleasure/displeasure, certainty/uncertainty, shelter/prison.

It is in this ambivalence, in the connotations of worry, that the charm of a hole, a grotto, a tunnel, lies. It is the enchantment of measuring up not only to surfaces or the impenetrability of solid surfaces, but to depth, and to the internal dimensions of the volume.

At this point, however, it is easy to capture another itinerary linked to the two opposing poles of the experience of inside: the dialectic between presence and absence, promoted by another opposition with strong emotional and mythical value, light/shadow, light/dark, the light of the outside environment and the shadow, if not the dark, of the cavity. In fact the opposition of light/shadow, light/dark recalls other oppositions that are equally emotionally charged: presence/absence, being/not being, life/death.

Ultimately, the posture could say: I want to see exactly how things are.



After thinking, he can act: sitting on the edge, with his feet inside the hole; his head bent slightly forward, looking downwards, his hands placed on the inside of the hole. The posture talks of careful observation and an evaluation of the known particulars of the new environment in order to make a choice: to be or not to be contained in the hole. The low position of the arms and shoulders, the legs swinging almost completely in the void, suggest that the decision has practically already been taken. But we cannot take the terms of his thoughts for granted: how do I get in the hole? Will it be big enough to hold me? Is it too deep? The ratio between the height of the hillock and the child will give the actual dimensions of the hole, but we still have to check.

Only the configuration of the mouth can suggest a certain emotional tension.



The decision has been taken: the waiting time is over.

Because it is taken from behind, this image provides little information, but the slight inclination of the head suggests that the boy is still looking downwards, checking the situation. The left hand is resting on the edge of the hole, still bent, perhaps also to support the body. The right arm leans forwards and the fingers of the hand also seem to be resting on the edge. The fact that the hands are still positioned one on one side and one towards the front reveals a prudent descent, confirming the idea that the boy is not completely at ease in this new environment. The actual depth of the hole, which can certainly not contain the boy's whole body if he stands up, and the presence of two large openings at the base of the hillock may make both the prudent descent and the connotation of mystery we give to the hole rather exaggerated. Looking with the detached eye of the observer, we cannot forget that the objective reality (things in a world of things) is

one thing, and the person-object relationship, with its fantastic repercussions, that emotional and mythical representation which a child, and not only a child, makes of it, is certainly another.



The point of view does not change, or rather, changes are only apparently insignificant. We can see that the torso is slightly twisted, shown by the movements of the hands and arms: now the right hand rests firmly on the right-hand side, while the left hand has moved forwards on the left-hand side.

This change of posture tells us that he has adjusted the position of his body, very probably to proceed with his immersion, not an easy task given the size of the opening which now, considering the position of the hands, we can imagine is not much wider than the boy's shoulders.

This is therefore a further confirmation that the action is underway.

A detail we should not neglect: the hillock of earth lies just below an open window, meaning that with all probability the boy is familiar with the place in which the events are taking place.



The adjustments have been made.

The immersion is almost complete, but the descent “inside” cannot be said to be truly completed while the eyes, that privileged channel of contact with the outside reality, remain “outside”.

Let us for a moment consider the part of the body that touched the bottom first, the feet. This is obvious, because the hole is vertical and therefore the feet seek the supporting surface and offer the boy the possibility to get his balance. The most uncertain aspect of the new environment was its depth, which could not easily be calculated: so, now that the supporting surface has been found, a sense of security should also have been found, but this does seem to have been assured yet.

Indeed, on the boy’s face and in his eyes we can see not exactly worry but at least perplexity. Perhaps he is looking for a reference? Our features are like pigeon holes, ready to be filled and modified by our momentary or long-term emotions that come from our own personal stories.

The detail of the bent legs which can be made out in the chiaroscuro and their ratio with the rest of the body help us to understand the actual dimensions of the hole.



The exploration has finally begun. We can still see the top of the boy’s head, and it is only the sequence of the photos that tells us that this action is an entrance and not an exit, an immersion and not an emersion.



The element constituting the key feature of this image is the contrast between light and dark, between the light (the white in the foreground) characterising the “outside” and the shadow (the dark background) which marks the “inside”. These two opposite poles, evoked well above, are both present at the same time, characterising this event. Between the two there is a well-defined limit: a rounded edge marking another opening, in addition to the one at the top, a passage we noted in the previous pictures. Immersed in this environment, we can make out two parts of the body, the head and part of the torso, joined by an ideal line, a curved line which can be traced along the upper limit of the head and the back. The idea of rotundity of the visible body is projected on the rest of the body which cannot be seen, excluding the fact that he is lying on the ground. We must therefore infer that he is crouching on one side, or is kneeling. In any case, the photo gives an overall impression of tranquillity, careful yet serene observation, due to the fact that the head is lowered and leaning forwards, the gaze is upwards, the eyes wide open, the muscle tone no greater than what can normally be read in the facial muscles and the lips. As before he carefully observed the “inside”, now the boy observes the “outside”, and we cannot exclude that he may be interested in the chiaroscuro characterising this place. Beyond the possible suggestions offered by the situation, it places him in a completely different perspective, allowing him to see the “outside” environment which he has always known with new eyes. This is the effect of “estrangement” by which everyday objects, that we perceive automatically to such a degree that we do not see them anymore, take on new meanings and become new precisely through the change of perspective which changes their context. Through the opening, the boy blends the sense of “inside” with that of “outside”, because they acquire new meaning due to the presence of the person who experiences them both at the same time.

The fear of the unknown, the hesitation of discovery, have all disappeared: the boy has conquered the heart of the structure.

Shown in two following photograms, the exit is highly effective: we can see the great satisfaction on



the boy's face, particularly his lips, at the fact that he excelled himself in conquering this place.

The posture in this action shows great self-confidence and competence in managing the passage from inside to outside.

The hands resting firmly on the earth seem to "feel it".



The festival of entrances and exits continues for a fairly long time! It is the discovery of the many possibilities the structure offers. The actions follow on swiftly, with the excitement of a boy who can freely experiment the pleasure of the intentional action.



### A return to our origins

The story could end with the sparkling sequence shown before, but instead there is a rather unexpected epilogue. While before there was a discovery of the two side entrances, now the boy's head appears through the central hole. This time, it is a re-emersion: the path is the exact opposite of the first one. While entering from above was an action that required adjustments in posture and attention, now the task is very much more arduous, due to the small hole which does not allow great freedom of movement and therefore an easy climb out.



The last thing to disappear through the hole during the immersion were the eyes: now they reappear. The sensation is that nothing happened before; it seems that a new story has begun, this boy pops up unexpectedly from below and wants to understand how he found himself there after a journey that took place completely inside, in the "inside", the belly of the earth. What will he find out there? Better to check.

Children are often capable of sudden changes that leave adults amazed: it is their way of being surprised by reality.



The point of view changes, but the action continues. The tension increases: here it is clear in the back of the neck that does not only support the head but also leans it backwards. The right shoulder can just be seen, but the fact that it is there tells us of a tension covering the whole body, helping it to perform the action also with a thrust from the feet and legs on the bottom. The right shoulder seems to be lifted: from this we can deduce that the transversal axis of the shoulders leans to the left, and that the whole body is shifted to the left.

The angle formed by the neck and chin must be considered the key for interpretation, the pertinent and fundamental feature of the picture: the opening or closing of that angle determines the lean of the whole body backwards or forwards.

The boy does not look upwards as we would imagine given the angle of his head: is he looking for the ground on which to start his thrust from?

Look how the edges of the hole are very rounded and smooth: clear signs that many have passed through here before!



As we could easily have expected, the emersion is far from easy.

The boy has turned round, because the observer's point of view has not changed. This makes us imagine that there is contact with the ground and that the hole is cone shaped: wider towards the inside and narrower towards the outside: this shape would make it easier to move the legs.

The backwards angle of the head is accentuated to create an opening in the body leaning forwards, showing off the throat. Consequently there is a contraction, the nape of the neck is closed. The transversal line of the shoulders seems to lean even more to the left. The right hand is bent on the forearm, the fingers bent but not closed in a tight fist, the index finger is stretched out in front. The mouth is slightly closed, as are the eyes.

The effort is all concentrated in the upper part of the body, leaving room for many interpretations:



from the most banal (looking upwards) to the most evocative (coming out of the mother earth).

Compared to the previous photograph, the boy has turned again. Now the right shoulder is raised, highlighting the angle of the whole torso to the left, and the head, which seems to rest on the edge of the hole. The hand can only just be seen, due to the very strong bending of the wrist: a sign of tension.

Climbing out of the hole clearly requires many adjustments in position, turning around, leaning the whole body from one side to the other.

It is not clear if this is a war with the “inside” or the “outside”!

Now it seems that the boy has found his way out of the hole. It is interesting to note the analogy of this posture with that of the entrance, due to the resting position of the forearm which doesn't have to support the body (the right shoulder would be raised).

It seems that the effort to get out of the hole is over, and the fatigue is rewarded. A last final push is all that is needed to complete this action and achieve the desired result.



Gabriella Bertolini, Alessia Varesano

## Tales of educators...

Gabriella Bertolini, Alessia Varesano *Educators at the "La Casetta" nursery in Trieste*

### The ugly duckling

I called the story I want to tell you "The Ugly Duckling" because, as happens in Andersen's fairy tale, it tells of an initial refusal, and the difficulties that a child who is apparently different from the others may have in settling into school. It also tells of those, in this case us educators, who should accept the child with no qualms and yet who find they are uncomfortable. It tells of simple, perhaps banal gestures, but which help the hearts of those wanting to receive love and those who give it.

Once I was in charge of a child a little more than a year old who was settling into nursery school. Unfortunately, right from the start I had difficulty in establishing a rapport with him. I gave him the nickname "caterpillar", because he was tall, strong, with a big body and a big voice.

He seemed physically "different" to other children of his age. His impetuous, lively way of moving around made me worry he would overwhelm the other smaller children who were still crawling.

During the settling in period, when he was very agitated or impetuous, I would try to stop him and he would cry, writhing about to free himself with a strength that other children did not have, and it was a huge effort for me to keep him in check. When he reacted in this way, he sweated enormously, and his sweat gave off a very bitter and intense smell which blocked me even further, making it difficult for me to help him be accepted into the group, and difficult for me because I had to look after him.

Increasing my discomfort with him, for a long period he suffered from diarrhoea every day: the pooch leaked out of his nappy all over the place, and I didn't know which way to deal with him, in the true meaning of the term.

I don't usually have any trouble changing nappies, it's all part of the job, but with him I just couldn't do it, I was blocked. I was in a crisis, I felt guilty because of this profound sense of refusal I felt towards this different child.

Things changed one day when I decided to deal with him as if he was really small, not that giant that I was afraid of and towards whom I felt not only repulsion but perhaps also some fear.

I started to give him a bath: as soon as I put him naked in the water, he calmed down, as if by magic, he stopped flailing about and protesting, his impetuosity turned into happiness. And on my part, I cared for him, I washed him, washed and combed his hair, but above all I played with him, something we had not done before because I was so busy defending myself from his smells and gestures. So I decided to spend a bit of time with him everyday having a bath, this special situation I had invented for us, to build our relationship and mitigate my feelings of conflict.

And so the situation got better: we had found a meeting place, and the initial discomfort turned into a moment of mutual pleasure, in fact one winter's day, when I hadn't taken him to the bathroom yet, he asked, "Why don't you wash my hair?" I told him it was cold and I didn't have a hair dryer to dry his hair, and he replied, "Well buy one!" For him the fact that I didn't forget him was still very important...

After the "bath time" period, our relationship changed, also in the other situations during the day at the nursery: he had become the child I got on best with, we would look at each other and understand each other right away, he played with the other children and had a totally fulfilling experience at the nursery.

And then I realised that the smell of his sweat wasn't so bad after all, and that his pooch was just like that of the other children, a little more abundant perhaps, but it didn't bother me anymore. Basically, the "ugly duckling" had become my "swan". And he was recognised as a brother among his peers.

I had confirmation of my fantasy one day, a long time after the boy had left the nursery, when I met him in the park and stopped to say hello.

His babysitter didn't know me, and when she asked him who he was talking to, he answered: "She's my teacher from the lovely nursery school I went to when I was little!".

Hearing these words was a joy for me, it repaid all my efforts. It confirmed that the acceptance of the child and his family is the first step to be taken in order to do this job well, establishing deep relations with the children in our care.

It made me think of the importance of these moments which are wrongly considered non-educational, routine, apparently banal, such as personal hygiene.

\* "La casetta" Trieste, award "Best Nursery school Project Infanzia - Piccolo Plauto 2017".



In fact these moments are times of profound intimacy and relation with the child, and are therefore highly educational, both he and I discovered ourselves.

And another, personal and much more profound thing, linked to the relationship with this child, that I discovered later on when, in supervision, I thought of how the child's impetuous aspects are very much my own.

I too am very lively, indeed sometimes overbearing, but like this child these characteristics are not always an indicator of self-confidence or boldness. And it is exactly at those times in which I seem more active, or "over the top" that the need to be held down as if I was small is intense, sometimes I too need a nice warm bath...

*Gabriella Bertolini*

### A disagreeable girl

This year I'm having trouble relating to a girl. First of all, let's debunk the widespread myth that children are all sweet, attractive and above all likeable.

In this case, Maria may be sweet and pretty, but she's not at all likeable. I have difficulty in accepting her behaviour, her attitude, her way of ordering the other children and seducing the adults. This is the second year we've spent together, and now she's grown I find it even more difficult to be around her.

I try to look at her with different eyes, to be more welcoming and understanding, I try to place her in the best conditions for playing with her classmates,

and then she says something, or acts in a certain way, and my efforts are in vain.

Talking with my colleagues and the coordinator helps me to accept my negative feelings and process my difficulties, but this does not bring the results I hoped for: I just can't get in tune with the girl. And the fact that my colleagues have the same feelings towards the girl unfortunately strengthens my negative emotions. It is as if there is a wall between us, every so often I can see over the top (when I pick her up, cuddle her to sleep...), but all too often it separates us, me on one side and Maria on the other.

We think about it and observe the relationship, comparing it with those I have with the other girls in my group: what is different in my approach, or the approach of the other girls towards me?

I enjoy spending time with the other girls, I like looking after them, picking them up, playing with them, laughing with them, consoling them when they need consoling, seeking to understand their needs... it is gratifying. That's what it is! It is gratification, the pleasure of spending time with someone, being useful to someone, indeed at times essential for someone, that is what is missing in my relationship with Maria.

Mutual gratification and above all personal gratification, I cannot feel the gratification for my work with Maria and her family.

The other girls and above all their families, they want me, they seek me out: for a piece of advice, a chat, some help. Maria's family does not seek me out, they do not want my professionalism, and this denigrates my every day work with the children and their parents.

So, as Maria does not feel that she has been put under my wing as her coordinator and the contact person for her family, she rejects me, and cannot accept a profound relationship with me.

And so her behaviour, her actions of a two-year old child, take on a different meaning. Through her actions, Maria is telling me something important that she cannot yet say with words.

She wants me to feel what she feels every day in her primary relationship, the most important one, when she is rejected. And which I too feel when she rejects me and when her parents do so as well, trivialising the child's world and my work. And what's more I realise that Maria feels something very special, an adult feeling that is hard to find in such small children: envy. Maria is envious of the bonds between educators and children, but also between the children, these first forms of friendship.

This is the triggering feeling, the one that explains all her provocations, her at times destructive gestures of refusal, which cry out: "If I can't have it then neither can you".

This conclusion, along with the comment of a new colleague, who is still getting to know the group of children, and who asks me why when Maria is disheartened she often asks for her father and almost never for her mother, and an invitation to come to the nursery which her mother did not accept, finally helps me to find the right path. It helps me to see get over the wall and see things from the little girl's side.

And so I realise that for the girl it is very important to have someone on her side, someone who welcomes her, welcomes what she feels, including her

difficult, negative feelings such as envy. A key adult who understands and supports her, who helps her to find new ways of relating to others, placing her in new situations, more suited to a child with her characteristics, and her relational history.

I can be that adult, a new reference, in a new and more profound relationship: I had nothing to lose, and now that I understood, I had nothing to ask Maria either. Now, I could only give and listen, cuddle, console, take her in my arms, care for her, joke and laugh, just her and I, putting her family, as well as my own personal requests for satisfaction, to one side.

Now, a few years on, I can say that my – our – effort to knock down that wall and undertake a new journey, brought its results, I found my own satisfaction, my famous gratifications: the girl sought me out more, she talked about me at home too, the relationship with the peer group and with the other educators improved.

My willingness to listen to her, understand and accept her, brought a new meaning to her actions, her behaviour and above all the underlying emotions which dominated them.

I... we had accepted her, and she let us do so. I have developed my own sensitivity towards the emotions we feel when working with small children, I have improved and extended my way of entering into contact with others, big and small, I have grown in both professional and human terms... and I hope that I may have contributed to the child's physical and mental well-being.

Maria was of great help to me.

*Alessia Varesano*



# Exploring new educational paradigms: what can we do... with i-theatre?



The narrative multimedia authoring laboratory for childhood education

## Teacher Carmela says...

When the little “red wagon” arrived to school, I told to curious children that it was a magic wagon and that, behind the cover panels, there was a sort of screen-theatre so that they could give life to their drawings and – even – some toys. With a group of sixteen elder children and some average ones (i.e., 4-5 years old) we were committed to the activity of making a book about an ecologic topic, therefore I thought we were going to make that story also in a “cartoon” version. “Is that going to be as the ones we see in TV?” – children asked me. Almost, but “way more special”: they would have been the leading actors!

As for the backgrounds, we chose the ones prepared for the book, then we created the characters: the “Mini-MEs”, with children’s own faces taken from photos, adding drawn clothes as each one liked. Isabel became a fairy, Davide got Superman, and so on. Then, with i-Theatre, we digitalized backgrounds (“what stands still”) and characters (“moving things”). And here the first problems came to me, so that I was going to regret my enthusiasm, by promising something that was beyond my current knowledge and preparation... But this, actually, happened to be an advantage: as, from the beginning, children never missed to help me! Indeed, compared to adults, they have no fear of trying. Even nowadays, I wonder why – as I was striving to understand what was going on, working or not – simply, children went for trials and attempts, without any trouble: they moved the characters, enlarged them with one or two fingers, reversed them by two firm touches. “That’s all, folks”, we should learn to act as they do: naturally.

Once the narrative materials were ready, we stored them into the “sun-basket-ball” (i.e., how we initially called the memory objects, but very rapidly we changed to the common term “Memory”). We also sketched a storyboard to have a more precise idea of what was coming before and after; then we started to record the story.

Everyone created one piece, working in small groups of 3-4 children per time. They took the characters from memory and arranged them on the screen, on the backstage area, i.e., outside the recording stage. We did some trials and then: “Action!”. The ones who were making other things fell silent to allow recording a good performance into the “small box” (recording box). Someone was brave already, others got stopped when noticed the red recording light, but afterwards they wanted to try again. Someone spoke very low, but then, after listening, unsatisfied, he found the microphone and spoke louder and closer; hearing their voices seemed so strange to everyone! Gradually, children got more and more self-confident: there was also someone singing a song of his own invention, someone else making sounds with objects...

As our “cartoon” was finished, the children’s happiness and satisfaction was filling the air: they asked to see it again, they wanted to show it to their parents. [...] The children’s life experiences and own personality emerged in the invented story, perhaps more than in other contexts. i-Theatre unfolds an “empty” expressive space, where everything can happen, so that it gets easier to express themselves. With our movie clip “Una storia felice” (i.e., “A happy tale”) we decided to take part in a contest, offered by Green Cross Italy and the Ministry of Education, and, after some months, we were awarded with a “mention of honor”!

**Note:** The experience has been conducted in the public kindergarten “Fucine” of Rovereto (TN), by the teacher Carmela Romeo). The school is equipped with the i-Theatre laboratory and participated to the training practice offered by the Childhood Office of the Childhood Service of Trento Autonomous Province, in collaboration with Coopselios (RE) and Edutech (TN). The movie “Una storia felice” is available on YouTube.

i-Theatre

i-Theatre is a product by **edutech**  
For further information and funding opportunities:  
Phone: 0461 1865865 | E-mail: info@edutech.it  
www.i-theatre.org

i-Theatre is **unique!** The only narrative based multimedia laboratory environment **totally designed for children’s education**, for **learning by playing**, which **seamlessly combines the handcraft wisdom of the narrative-theatre action model and the use of digital tools** in the same user experience, featuring a **tangible user interface** based on concrete physical objects.

For **media literacy**, **school inclusion** and for **all targets of experience** (in line with EU key competences).

i-Theatre is adopted by INDIRE within the “Avanguardie Educative” and by **childhood services (kindergartens and primary schools)**, **public and private**, in Italy and abroad; it is used within the ongoing **international Erasmus+ EU project “STORIES”**. The laboratory equipment can be funded in Italy through the “Piano Operativo Nazionale 2014-2020” (PON); for instance, by creation of **digital environments, creative ateliers, innovative school libraries**.



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