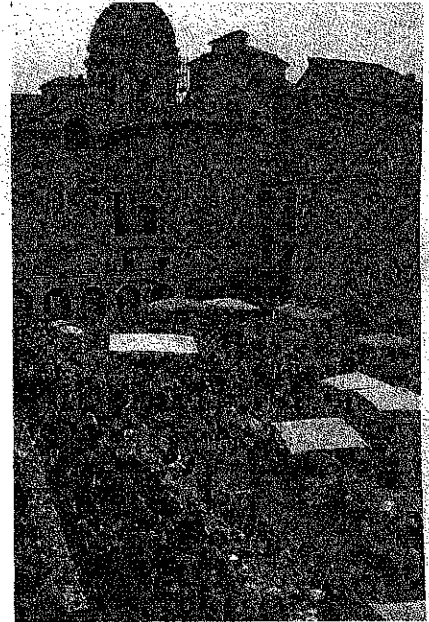


"Anyone facing a project
is thinking about actions
that are destined to
change existing situations
into desired situations."

Loris Malaguzzi, pedagogue



Thoughts, theories and experiences for an educational project with participation

Paola Cagliari, Angela Barozzi and Claudia Giudici

In Italian schools, the relationship between school and family is generally referred to by the term "participation", though the theories, experiences and projects encompassed by this single term may be very different. The experience of Reggio Emilia represents one of the possible approaches.

The educational project of the nurseries and nursery schools of Reggio Emilia is by definition a participation-based project: its true educational meaning is to be found in the participation of all concerned. This means that everyone – children, teachers and parents – is involved in sharing ideas, in discussion, in a sense of common purpose and with communication as a value. Rather than separation or disagreement, these encounters foster both dialogue between different roles, different ideas, different cultures, and negotiation leading towards building together. Rather than being an experience where the competencies of some individuals deny the competencies of others, there is recognition that everyone – children, teachers and parents – is an active subject in the educational

relationship, each contributing complementary and necessary knowledge. Carla Rinaldi states that "participation is an educational strategy that characterises our way of being school and doing school. Participation involves the children, the families, and the teachers and is viewed not only as taking part in something but being part – the essence, the substance of a common identity, a "we" which comes alive through participating. So that, in our experience, education and participation fuse together: the what (education) and the how (participation) become the form and substance of a single building process."

"For me it is looking for growth through times of shared reflection, through opportunities for exchange, comparing points of view, taking our thoughts further, so that I am closer to my child as a parent, so that we grow together as people".

From the minutes of the City and Childhood Council of Anna Frank nursery school (City and Childhood Councils are

organisations for social management and participation in the municipal schools in Reggio Emilia. Each council consists of all of the school personnel and elected parents and other citizens).

So in the Reggio Emilia experience, participation does not mean simply the involvement of families in the life of the school. Rather it is a value, an identifying feature of the entire experience, a way of viewing those involved in the educational process and the role of the school. The subjects of participation then, even before the parents, are the children who are considered to be active constructors of their own learning and producers of original points of view concerning the world. If the school truly values and practices participation, then the children's sharing of their points of view with other children and adults can translate into a culture of childhood that is deeply embedded in the school itself as well as in the broader social fabric.

"Schools cannot be conceived of as bodies separated from a context, but as tools which are profoundly integrated with the families and their local area. (I am talking about) a school which sees itself as a living part of the social fabric, and of the urban and environmental condition of the children; which is careful to see their potential (...), to steep itself in their formative processes together with the other subjects involved."

Luciano, citizen

The subjects of participation also include all the school staff. The teachers, in particular, do not merely execute programmes established by others, but participate actively in the construction of the knowledge-building processes of each child and each group of children, as well as their own; that is, they are learning to teach. All this takes place through listening and research conducted within a collegial framework.

Participation, in fact, is based on the idea that reality is not objective, that culture is a constantly evolving product of society, that individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to construct a project, especially an educational project, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with those of others, within a framework of shared values. The idea of participation is founded on these concepts: and in our opinion, so, too, is democracy itself.

Therefore, if we want a school based on participation, we must create spaces,

contexts, and times when all subjects – children, teachers and parents – can find opportunities to speak and be listened to. The first and necessary level can already be found in many Italian schools. But if participation is to assume a role in the active and democratic construction of the educational project of a school and community, this first level is not enough.

"To participate" is a verb that can be conjugated in both the singular and the plural. Each person can participate as an individual subject who singly makes his or her contribution and singly takes in the information and contributions provided by the others. Each child and adult has a different way of participating, of being an active part, because each individual is different. Individual participation is, and will always be, an aspect of everyone's participation. But participation takes on further meaning if the school presents itself as a community – in relation to the wider community represented by the town – and with a broader strategy.

Furthermore, a nursery or nursery school wishing to be a real place of education must maintain close contact with social and cultural issues, ideas, contexts and lifestyles which are constantly changing. This is necessary in order to produce updated versions of practices and values, and to develop cultural and political proposals and vision. This should be done with an approach that, as Reggio pedagogistas Daniela Lanzi and Ivana Soncini state, "holds together the great cultural, political and philosophical currents, the values that look towards the future, and the particularity of daily educational practice".

"I think it's important that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the way they feel they can and so maybe take on responsibilities different from the responsibilities that another person assumes."

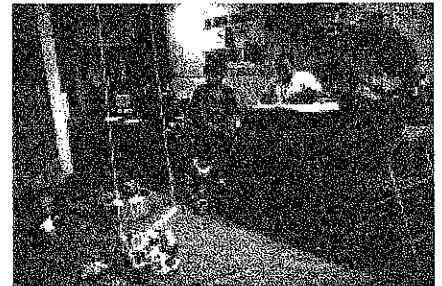
Tiziana, parent

This aim can only be achieved by adopting the value and practice of participation as we have defined it: that is, by actively engaging all the children, teachers and parents in a community dimension that involves reading and interpreting change together.

This idea of participation therefore, defines the early childhood centre as a social and political place and thus as an educational place in the fullest sense. However, this is not a given, so to speak, it is not a natural, intrinsic part of being a school. It is a philosophical choice, a choice based on values, which we, in Reggio Emilia, have always tried to implement in terms of

"Participation is an opportunity for parents to understand better the processes behind certain choices, and it helps to understand certain positions, but that's not all. It means that you can be an active part in a complex and dynamic process like education which can't be divided up into clear-cut, separate units, and doesn't allow for stopping and starting. It presupposes a strong, active relationship between families, schools and the whole city."

Giovanna, parent.



Opposite page: Remida Day, a day of creative recycling. Market of second-hand household items, Piazza San Prospero, Reggio Emilia

This page from top: Individual meetings before entering the nurseries. A meeting of one of the City Childhood Councils, Diana nursery school. An evening inside the kitchens of a nursery. A party in the park.

"Educating means letting yourself get involved, it means knowing how to listen to other people, knowing how to place yourself in relation to things, and taking what comes out of the ideas of people who think differently from you."

Luisa, parent



"Everyone in their small way can contribute to the spreading of a philosophy in our city, to be more attentive to the needs of people as individuals, starting with early childhood. (It is) a philosophy founded on dialogue, on the exchange of points of view, on acceptance of differences, on deep respect for life."

Silvana and Andrea, parents

Parts of this article and the illustrations are from *Making learning visible: children as individual and group learners* – published by Reggio Children. © 2001 Reggio Children, The President and Fellows of Harvard College, and The Municipality of Reggio Emilia.

Quotes are from the publication *Charter of the city of childhood councils – Municipal Documentation Centre, Reggio Emilia*.

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Above: voting for the city and childhood councils, Diana nursery school.

Below from left: materials prepared for a meeting with the parents.

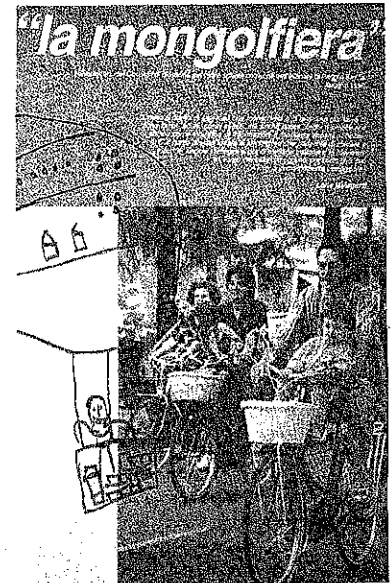
City and childhood council, Diana nursery school.
Party in the gardens.

teaching as well as professional development and family participation. But are parents competent 'participants'? Usually, schools do not consider them so, because they do not see themselves as social and political places and therefore do not recognise the competencies of parents as citizens. Furthermore, by concentrating their attention on teaching various subjects, what schools consider to be important is mainly specialised knowledge that, for the most part, parents do not have.

What do we mean by competency? In one sense it is a recognition that schools must give to parents, as well as to children and teachers. This recognition – again a choice based on values – is an acknowledgement of the citizen's right to engage in the discussion of social issues that concern everyone. Parents, therefore, are competent because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretation and ideas, which are articulated in implicit or explicit theories and are the fruit of their experience as both parents and citizens.

In another sense, competency is a process that is nurtured and enriched precisely by the participation processes; these processes must therefore have competency as their goal. The images in this article, accompanied by brief captions, illustrate some possible occasions of participation by the families. But they are not exhaustive in terms of the complexity and variety of situations, moments and learning processes and strategies that shape the experience of participation. Even if it were possible and desirable to compile a complete index of all the events that could be included in the participation process, we feel this would not give the reader a fuller sense of parents' participation.

Indeed, participation is not a model that can be reproduced and above all it is not a series of sequential events. It is an experience and a process whose contents and strategies are interconnected and interdependent. It generates directions which are always new (unique and



Above: cover of the *la mongolfiera* magazine, the newsletter of the City and childhood councils of the municipal early childhood centres, Reggio Emilia.

original) and which are constructed in close relation to the identity of the individual protagonists and of the groups in which they come together. For when there is real dialogue in the group, a group identity will emerge that makes room for each member's individual ideas, thoughts, expectations, desires and rights – but which rises above them through the creation of proposals that bring together these elements in such a way that all can recognise themselves and feel that they have participated.

In this article we have put forward an idea of participation as inquiry located in an area between the individual and the community, an area for the consensual creation of change and of a culture which is innovative because it is generated through important processes of democracy. If we take this perspective, then the aim of schools is to construct public arenas for the production of shared reflection which lets each and every individual's own thinking circulate and grow.

