

# Innovations

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## REGGIO TUTTA: The Evolution of a Research Project

By Mara Davoli with the collaboration of Paola Cagliari

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*Mara Davoli has worked as an atelierista [studio teacher] in Pablo Neruda School, one of the municipal preschools in Reggio Emilia, since 1973. Paola Cagliari has been a pedagogista [education coordinator] with the Reggio municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools since 1988. The following is adapted from Mara's presentation during the February 2003 study tour to Reggio Emilia. Paola participated in the discussion session following Mara's presentation. Mara began her presentation by sharing her perspective regarding the role of the atelier [studio] and the atelierista in the Reggio municipal preschool program.*

In each of the municipal preschools, there is an *atelier*, thought of as a place of provocation, a space where the minds and hands of children can be active and engaged. The *atelier* is not the only space where the languages of expression are introduced. In fact, in our schools and infant-toddler centers, there also mini-*ateliers* in each classroom. In the mini-*ateliers*, children and teachers can encounter and experiment daily, as a part of their normal experience, with the expressive languages. The *atelier* and the mini-*atelier* are places to discover what children build and produce with their hands and with their intelligence. They are places to discover and make visible how children construct hypotheses, and how projects evolve. The presence of the *atelier* and the *atelierista*, working along with teachers, has contributed much to our work on documentation. Little by little, day-by-day, documentation strongly informs our way of being with the children and with our colleagues, and gives us a way to be closer to the children. Documentation has refined our styles of observation so that the processes of children's learning become the basis of our dialogue with families.

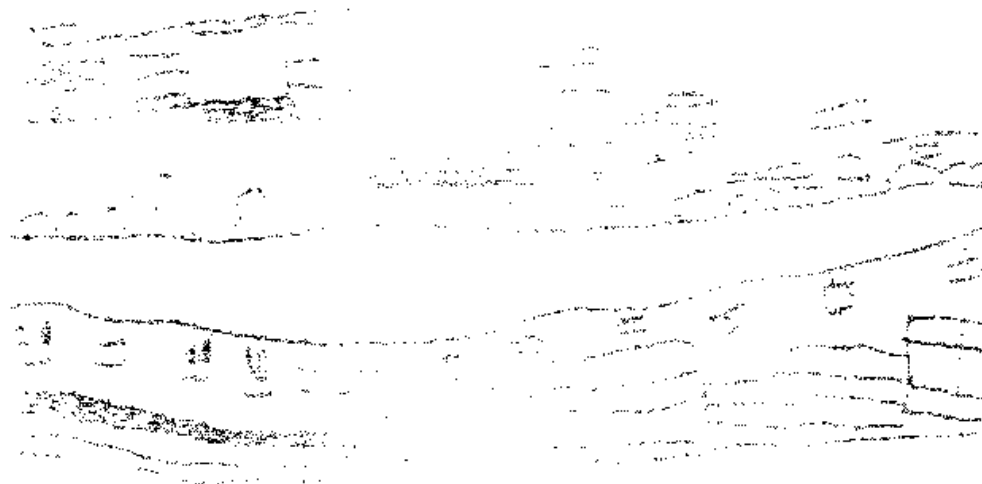
I would like to share with you one of the projects featured in "The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit: "Reggio Tutta: A Guide to the City by the Children." This project involved two and three year-old children at two infant-toddler centers, and three to six year-old children at 12 municipal preschools. It was a very long-term project that spanned a period of two years. I would like to highlight the processes, strategies and choices of children and adults that led to the creation of the book, *Reggio Tutta: A Guide to the City by the Children*.

*continued on next page*

### ***The genesis of the project***

Who chose the topic? Who decides how a project begins? We ask these questions every day when we work with children, not just during long-term projects. In this case, the idea to create a guide to the city by the children had its roots in research carried out in 1996. We wanted to investigate what images, ideas and theories the children have about their city, Reggio Emilia, and cities in general.

Why did we choose this topic for children aged two to six? We believe that the city, its identity, how it is inhabited and its destiny is a very relevant topic, especially at this time in our history. It is a vital topic that involves both adults and children, that encourages us to reflect on our own experiences and relationships but also on the idea of citizenship itself. We have parents in our schools who come from other cities in Italy, or other countries and speak different languages. These parents give us an image and a story of Reggio



Emilia of a very different kind, through different eyes. This theme of the city lent itself easily to including parents and, if possible, we always try to involve parents in the life of the school. Sometimes working with the parents and the children in parallel ways evolves naturally from the project. The conversations we had with the parents throughout the course of this investigation were one way of exchanging personal stories. They were also a way of engendering discussion about the idea of what a citizen is, what it means to be a part of city, how a city can be lived in. This is a delicate area: this idea of what it means to be a citizen. What should a citizen be? What could a citizen be? Together, we have to determine which idea of citizenship we are building. This is a topic that encourages exchange and the sharing of perspectives. If a school is a place of life, if we want our school to be in touch with life, it has to be a place that collects different points of view and a place where those points of view can be expressed. We chose this theme of the city for these reasons.

### ***What is a city?***

Beginning with this broad question, we opened an investigation with all of the children in the 20 municipal schools in Reggio. This was an investigation built on open questions, as a way to stimulate group dialogues and reflections. We did not ask questions only to discover what the children know and don't know. We asked open questions in order to create a group context in which we could share our opinions and our points of view, a context in which we could construct new knowledge. In order to build a learning community, we must have a strong idea of the individuals who are working together. We must understand their differences and be able to relate those differences. The expression of each child must find a place.

I would like to share with you some of the questions we asked the children, as I believe they could give you an idea of our initial choices and how we approached this investigation:

The city, cities: images, ideas and theories

*Do you know what a city is?*

*What do you think cities are for?*

*Why, in your opinion, were they built?*

*Can you tell where a city starts? And can you tell when it ends?*

*Do you think a city has a shape?*

*Are there people who don't live in the city? In that case, where do you think they live?*

The results of this investigation suggested the idea of a guide to the city. While the children were asked to think about their images of cities, in general, and to discuss their possible definitions of cities, this also meant speaking implicitly about their own city, about Reggio Emilia, their experiences and their way of living in the city.

Carla Rinaldi asked me to coordinate this project of the guide, together with a colleague of mine, Gino Ferri, a teacher at Pablo Neruda School. I was initially concerned because a guide is a familiar tool for adults, and we risked imposing our images and conceptual structure on those of the children. This is a risk we often take when working with children. Even if we are not conscious of it, we face this dilemma every day because of our own pre-conceived notions and theories. I believe that we can choose to offer topics for the children's consideration as long as we are aware of this risk.

### ***How did we begin?***

Keeping in mind the results of the investigation, we asked ourselves:

*What does the word "guide" evoke in the children?*

*What do they know, if anything, about guides?*

*What do they identify them with?*

This is another strategy that we often use . . . trying to find out questions before having answers. We sensed that we could start from here to sketch some possible boundaries of investigation and we could begin to formulate the initial working hypotheses. For these reasons, we decided to focus the investigation on three aspects. We worked to develop open questions to stimulate the exchange of ideas, questions that we

could think about and reformulate while we were with a group of children.

### **1) children's hypotheses on the idea of a guide**

"Last year, we talked a lot about the city and cities. We also drew them and built them. This year, we would like to make a 'guide' of the city of Reggio. Do you know what a guide is? Have you ever seen them?"

### **2) children's hypotheses on the visitor's possible motivation for coming to Reggio**

"Many people come to visit Reggio, our city. In your opinion, why do they choose to come to Reggio?"

### **3) children's views and suggestions about inhabiting the city**

"Where would you start? What would you say to introduce our city to all those people who come and who have never been here before?"

"What kind of things can be done in Reggio that, in your opinion, could be interesting for these people?"

"What kind of suggestions would you give them in terms of things to see, to do and why?"

During a meeting with our colleagues from the infant-toddler centers and schools working on the guide, we shared these suggestions for open questions, and we also shared possible strategies in order to encourage conversations and dialogues with the children. After one month, this first part of the project was done. We collected all of the conversations from all of the schools. We often record and transcribe our experiences with the children but, in this case, we decided to transcribe all of the children's and teachers' questions and thoughts. The children participated in this investigation with a great deal of enthusiasm. This produced a large quantity of verbal materials, but also some first graphic representations by the children. These helped to give more strength and visibility to their thoughts and mental images. The collection of images is tightly woven within our way of working. This is not just part of our process of understanding what is happening. It's a way of going back to the children and giving back to the children images of what we've done together. It's a process of re-reading and re-interpreting processes that have been elaborated by adults and children together.

We suggested to the children that they become interpreters of their city. Being sensitive to the possible thoughts, needs and desires of others meant changing their point of view and putting themselves in someone else's shoes. When you are able to do this, you are more likely to understand and represent the perspective of others. Elaborating new ideas means making them visible and being able to discuss them. This becomes integral to the process of re-elaborating. Young children have a natural impulse to share what they know with someone else.

This is an intrinsic part of knowledge. When we generate knowledge, we want to understand that knowledge, reflect on that knowledge and share that knowledge. Everyday, it is important to offer the children the opportunity to discuss new knowledge, to look at new concepts, to exchange points of view about that knowledge. It's also important to offer children the opportunity to think on their own. Building for oneself a place where visibility is possible, to make visible what we know, to render visibility is not just a biological impulse, but also a cultural impulse. This is a precise political choice: that school is a place where culture is produced. That is why we have to work with extremely young children on how the processes evolve, how the culture is produced rather than on what is produced. Great minds, people who produce the culture of our time, do not work in isolation. Most original work is done through the opportunity of exchange with other people.

It's obvious that the children are aware of their act of participation in their world, and the process of building something meaningful and significant. A guide to the city is a very large project. It isn't necessary to do a large project in the school to leave a trace, to give back. Even in the very tiny gestures that occur in the school everyday, we see this re-launching, this giving back and participating. When you visit the preschools, you can see the signs of this desire, this need and pride that the children have in participating, in leaving traces of themselves for others.

We engaged in parallel research and exploration of the city with the children and with the parents. Teachers, *pedagogisti*, *atelieristi* and parents met regularly during the course of this project. We knew that everyday, the parents take the children with them wherever they go in the city. So we asked the parents to try to imagine how the children lived their experiences in the city:

going shopping, to the hairdresser, to the park. We asked the parents to imagine the city from another person's point of view, to change their point of view and their way of seeing through the eyes of another person. We also shared with the parents what their children were doing in school that was related to the city. We had many conversations with the parents and we asked them many questions. We asked them to try to tell the story of the city from the perspective of people of different ages: that of a young child, an adolescent, a young couple, and as parents with a family.

*How did we orient ourselves within the thoughts, images and suggestions of all the children in each school?*

This is a challenge we face everyday, when we are living and working with children. How can we, as teachers, paint a portrait of our life with children? In this case, we read the materials produced by the children in each school several times, pulling out the different emerging points of view. Then we made parallel and cross readings of all the collected materials. From our first interpretations of the materials, a general map emerged: a first portrait of the city that incorporated the dimensions of time, space and everyday life.

After these parallel and cross readings, we organized our first interpretations in this way:

- thematic folders of the first locations suggested by the children that contained verbal and graphic materials
- a document that summarizes the work done by all the schools, making visible our first choices and interpretations. This is important because interpretation is subjective. We have to be aware of such subjectivity. Is the interpretation mine or that of the group I am observing? It is important to have the right materials to make our interpretations visible.

We met with our colleagues in the different schools once again, in order to share with them this first landscape, our first choices that contributed to the development of new hypotheses. These discussions became the basis on which we formulated new in-depth research and also new encounters of the children with the city. This strategy includes listening and interpreting in order to re-launch. We see through our experience in the infant-toddler centers that even very small children will propose visions of the world, which have



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*-Mara Davoli*

various forms and various shapes. But it's very, very difficult for us, as adults, to know how to read them, to know how to see them, to know how to collect these visions. The languages of small children are so subtle and so interwoven that sometimes it can be a tiny gesture that gives us a vision of whole ideas. This is where tools for observation become essential. It is the adults' responsibility to produce interpretations. We have to be able to make interpretations that are open and broad but also interpretations that are courageous and brave. They have to be optimistic interpretations, which credit the child with ability. These interpretations with very young children . . . how we create frames of reference and how we translate these tiny gestures . . . gives us a way of sharing with parents and other colleagues a vision of children, so that they can collaborate in producing these interpretations.

Three important aspects emerged from this first part of the project:

### **1) the children's images of guides**

What is a guide? The children suggested many concepts and images regarding guides:

- books and booklets ("It's something you hold in your hand . . . a guide tells you everything about that place.")
- maps and street maps
- the telephone directory
- postcards
- portfolios
- videotapes
- a person (The dialogue of a four year-old child: "If the Dutch people come here, you need a Dutch lady who lives here and also speaks the language.")

In the beginning of the project, the children also suggested to us that a guide is an invitation given to the others and it is beautiful. Two girls said:

"First you have to introduce yourself, then you say your first name and last name. You have to write on it: 'We invite you to Reggio'."

In fact, the children seemed to believe that a warm welcome was one of the elements that qualify the city and can motivate the visitors. This is a context that we decided to support.

### **2) the problem of the forms of communication**

This dialogue among two children can be an example:

"We can write in English, too; otherwise, they won't understand it. Everyone speaks their own language. If I write 'biblioteca' (library) and then somebody from Rome comes, he can read it because he's Italian, so he understands it. But if a Chinese person comes, he can't!!!"

"So we can write 'biblioteca' in lots of languages or draw a book. If you make a drawing of a book, they'll understand it for sure!"

This is an indication that the children give us. They suggest to us to use different languages . . . from the written one to the iconic, made up of drawings, symbols, post cards, maps and photographs . . . in order to have universal understanding and communication, we could say the "hundred languages of children."

### **3) a question that strongly characterized the children's reflections in this initial phase of the work: how to orient yourself in an unknown place**

I think this is an experience everyone has had and we realized that this was a major issue for the children.

In the first conversations, they often used the word "map," but what meanings do children attribute to a map? How do they construct their own mental maps? And regarding Reggio, how many different maps can it have? For the four and five year-old children, the presence of maps in a guide seems to be absolutely indispensable:

"Maps are for looking at the streets and then you go. It's the starting point."

"A map is like a street that you have to follow, and then you have to walk on it."

The children made different kinds of maps, using both words and drawings. They made general maps of the city, but also maps of thematic routes. This dialogue of four year-old children is an example:

"You need a lot of maps: one for the churches, the squares, the fountains, the bakeries and the pastry shops; a map for money, one for sleeping and one for dancing . . ."

"One for meeting people, a map of the cafés and bars, and one for the schools . . ."

"And then one whole one! You need a whole one of everything; it's no good to have just a piece, it's not enough!"

While the children were having this discussion, it seemed that words alone were not enough. Children strongly need to leave traces on paper. It is as if the mark of the pencil that travels over the space of the paper helps them to feel the movement and gives visibility to their interior paths. These traces are sometimes extremely essential; other times, they are dense and intricate. We believe that the children's maps are always extraordinarily exact, with a kind of exactness that forces us to turn our adult standards upside down, that forces our thoughts to search for different points of reference. This is because the children's maps are multi-sensory and contain places of relationships, encounters, smells and noises, stories of life. These kinds of maps are composed of fragments of personal stories. The children consciously and humorously declared the difficulty of interpretation. A three year-old child said:

"Well, but if you haven't already seen it (the city), sometimes it's hard. Some people who aren't Italian, I

don't know if they can understand it. Maybe we could make a map for getting lost, too!!!"

### *A guide to the city by the children*

The work on the guide involved a large number of children, teachers, *atelieristi* and *pedagogisti* over two years. As the work progressed, we had frequent meetings to read and interpret the quantity of materials, traces, observations and documentations of the different projects that were accumulating. As our goal was to write a book, we had to face another problem: to find a form and a narrative structure for bringing these



"travel notes" in line with the images and the ideas of a guide suggested by the children that would reflect an image of childhood.

The encounter and the dialogue with the graphic artists, who know our experience very well, offered us further interpretations and points of view. Our decision-making process regarding the title and the image for the cover of the book is an example of this merging of perspectives. We were almost at the end of the graphic and page layout choices but no image, drawing, picture or word seemed to be enough to represent this kaleidoscopic portrait of the city made by the children, which was also a self-portrait. My colleague Gino and I had the responsibility to coordinate the work, to give form to a bridge that linked our colleagues of the infant-toddler centers and schools. Each school knew its own experience but not those of the others. We knew that the title of the book is important. Loris

Malaguzzi [founder of the Reggio municipal preschool program] used to say to us: "A title is sort of a very condensed thesis." When we document an experience, even very short experiences, we have to find a title that represents the identity of this experience. After looking at different materials again and again, three year-old Chiara's drawing and title seemed to us a good metaphor to represent both the complexity of the city itself and, also, the children's willingness to themselves get lost and not follow linear paths. The title *Reggio Tutta* was, in our opinion, perfect. *Reggio Tutta* doesn't mean "all about Reggio" but something like "Reggio all of it." The choice for the color of the book, yellow (one that identifies the telephone directory) was also intentional.

### Identity traits of cities

I would like to propose some common identity traits of cities suggested by the children from the different schools:

#### • boundaries

This offers an idea of cities as "pieces of the world" seen and thought in relation, a vision that is local and global at the same time. A five year-old child said:

"There's only one country: for example, America is outside of Italy, but it's still on the Earth."

The children also presented the idea of flexible and elastic boundaries. These images force us to reflect on the fact that daily, in the Balkans, in Africa and in many other parts of the world, drawing borders has become synonymous with violence. Fortunately the children, the utopian inhabitants of the future, remind us that "the boundary is like smoke."

#### • the city center

Another strong identity trait of Reggio that emerged is the concept of the city center, proposed by the children as the starting point:

"The center is like the center of the world, where everything goes around it."

But for one four year-old child, the center is also a terminal point, perhaps a place where the accumulated stories, relationships and experiences come together:

"In the city, there are two beginnings, and in the middle, right in the middle, there is the end."

#### • squares/piazza

This idea of a square or *piazza*, as we say in Italian, culturally and historically belongs to Reggio, and is explored and narrated by the children as the pulsing heart of the city:

"The big square is the world of Reggio Emilia. They built it so that lots of people could go there."

The children described the *piazza* as a space conceived and lived:

"to go on bikes with our friends"

"to take your dog for a walk"

"to read the newspaper"

"to watch the pigeons that group on the roofs"

"to have celebrations"

"to do the shopping"

"a place also good for people who just want to be quiet"

... an idea of the *piazza* as a place of relationships and encounters, a welcoming place for people of all ages.

#### • views of ground and sky

If we follow the children's moving eyes, we discover unexpected perceptions that keep the earth in relationship with the sky:

"In the square, there are lots of little stones that all fit real close together. They make the shape of a rainbow on the ground."

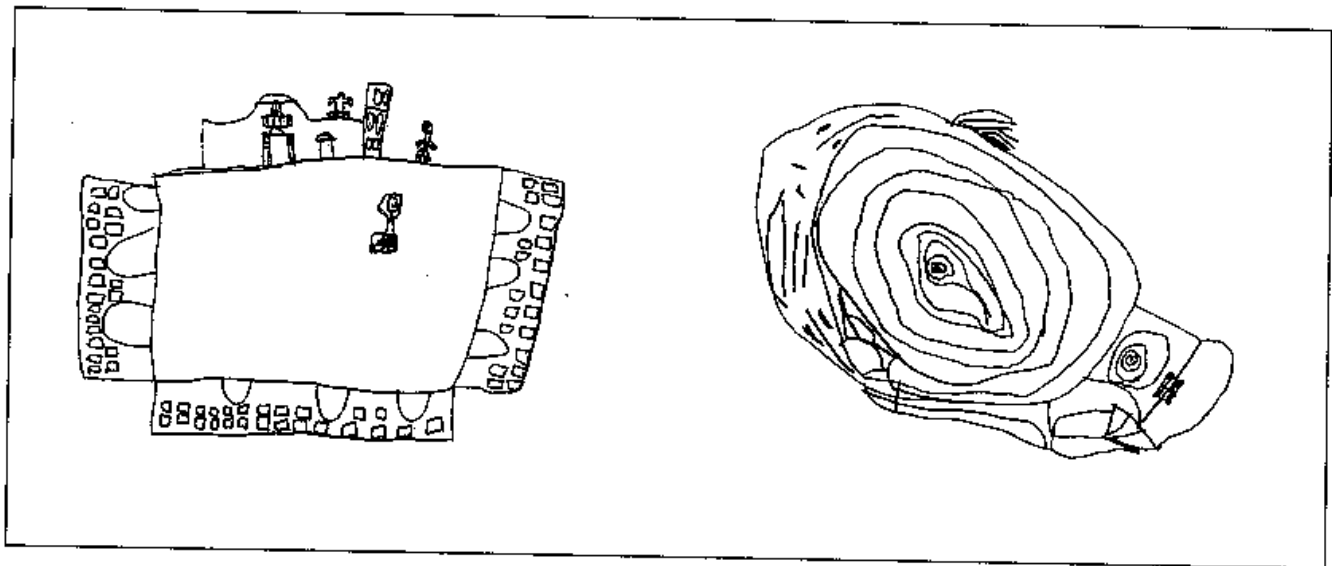
Children always find meaning in relationships:

"They made them (like a rainbow) so the children can run and play with the pigeons and scare them."

The big fountain-statue "is like a café for the birds. The water comes down. It comes down all the time and it's free!"

"In the center, the streets are narrow. You have to look up high to see the sky. When you walk in town, you don't see the sky up there."

"The mayor's building has a balcony where you can see the whole square from up high."



• **multi-sensory city**

The perceptive and sensory aspects - colors, lights, sounds and smells - are other elements underlined by the children as soft qualities that characterize, transform, give meaning and identity to the city:

"In the city, it smells wet."

"And in the winter, it really smells wet."

The market can also be explored and narrated through its smells and sounds:

"You can smell the perfume of the ladies that go by, the smell of pizza and cakes. You can smell fresh bread and smells from the houses, because when they cook you can smell it in town, too."

"This church is incredible. All you hear is the sound of ladies walking, lighting candles, closing the door. You hear people praying, real quiet. There's a lot of shade and just a little bit of light."

"At night, Reggio is beautiful because they turn on the streetlights that look like lots of suns, because you don't see the poles."

And in our beautiful theater:

"Because the velvet (in the theatre curtain) promises that you can hear the music."

These images tell us that if we are able to listen to the children . . . leaving them their times and ways to explore and live in the city . . . we, as adults, can gain something because the children's view of the city is optimistic and full of life, open to the future while firmly rooted in the present. Children have a sense of future that demands to be listened to and dialogued with.

They have a tenacious feeling of optimism that claims the right to be part of the dialogue that gives shape and identity to the city.

I have shared with you only some aspects of this project that did not seem to have an end. It was difficult to finish it because there was always a new story, a new suggestion, a new view on the city. But we gave ourselves a deadline: February 23rd is Loris Malaguzzi's birthday. He is the guide of our experience and since he died in 1994, we have celebrated his birthday every year. So on that day in 2000, the book was presented and offered to the city in a public event with children, parents, teachers, the mayor and many other friends.

Now that this project has become something tangible, we hope it is able to be, as the children said, an invitation. Whether encountering Reggio for the first time or returning, it's an invitation for those of you who might get lost in the city. But you will have with you the many maps, made of images and strong emotions that the children traced and offered us. You will also have an invitation to listen to the children and to their values. This project was an experience that required the school of knowing to find connections with the school of expressing, opening the door to the hundred languages of children. This research reflected the presence of Loris Malaguzzi and his pedagogy. I don't believe that educators can know each day where they are going and where they would like to go. It is a route that you discover as you travel. We have the obligation to think about the future because of the type of work we do. We have to be open to moving and changing because young children are always growing. The future is a necessity of the evolution of humankind.