

Conversation with a Group of Teachers

Amelia Gambetti

This conversation took place at the La Villetta School during one of the professional development sessions attended by a number of teachers who have been working at the school for many years and teachers who have only recently started their experience there. Like other conversations, it was part of a professional development project whose objective, among many others, was to analyze the problem areas that were emerging from the daily experience of these new teachers. Terms such as theory, practice, professional development, observation, documentation, strategies, projects, collaboration, and many others came up repeatedly during the conversation and became concepts within which new content started to develop.

The voices of the participants followed one another, alternated with one another, and at times overlapped, seeming to need more space in which to be heard. At times the thoughts that emerged were echoed, as if to find confirmation in different ways or to strengthen a reflection that has been enriched by the opinion of someone else.

This seesaw of dialogues and different points of view is part of a long-term knowledge-building process that leaves open the possibility of revising one's thinking within a situation that is in a constant state of flux, in a search for new identities.

The first question in this conversation stemmed from discussions held during earlier sessions, which had led the teachers to look for more appropriate definitions of their roles based on a careful analysis of the complexity of their work.



Discussion group



Amelia Gambetti - 50 years old, has been the Coordinator of Reggio Children since 1996 and Liaison for Consultancy in Schools in different countries all over the world. She was a teacher at the La Villetta School for twenty-five years. Since 1992 she has been collaborating with universities and schools mainly in the United States for the research and study of the experience of the Reggio Emilia Municipal Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools.



Simona Laiacona - 22 years old, is a substitute teacher at the La Villetta School, currently teaching in the five-year-olds' class. After receiving her secondary school diploma in science and education, she became a substitute teacher on a yearly contract in the Reggio Emilia Municipal Preschools, where she has been working for three years.



Orietta Montepietra - 27 years old, has been working at the La Villetta School since 1994; she currently teaches in the three-year-olds' class. After receiving her secondary school diploma in education, she has been a substitute teacher on a yearly contract in the Reggio Emilia Municipal Preschools for about four years.



Teresa Bucci - 31 years old, currently works at the La Villetta School as a support teacher in the four-year-olds' classroom. Like Simona, she is a substitute teacher with a yearly contract.



Giovanni Piazza - 47 years old, has been working as the atelierista at the La Villetta School since 1973. He started his teaching experience here after receiving his secondary school diploma in visual arts.



Diletta Tirelli - 30 years old, has been working at the La Villetta School since 1993 and currently teaches in the five-year-olds' class.* After receiving her secondary school diploma in education, she worked for about two years in a municipal infant-toddler center before going on to work in the preschools.



Barbara Martelli - 26 years old, has a degree in pedagogy and works as a substitute teacher on a yearly contract at the La Villetta School, currently in the three-year-olds' class. She worked for a number of years as a substitute teacher in other schools in the Emilia-Romagna region.



Paola Barchi - 40 years old, has been working at the La Villetta School since 1987; she currently teaches in the five-year-olds' classroom. After receiving her secondary school diploma in education, she worked as a substitute teacher in the Reggio Emilia Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers for about seven years and was subsequently hired on a permanent contract.

* Current class assignments refer to the 1999-2000 school year. For further information on school and staff organization, see Appendix D.

Amelia: In the Reggio Municipal Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools, the concept of “being in a state of permanent research” is being increasingly developed. We like to define our work, the way we are immersed in our work as teachers, as a way of permanently “researching/searching for something”; and I think the way we evolve within various experiences is also part of the long-standing process of building our own identity. In view of this, how have you begun to understand the meaning of the statement that teachers can be considered “pedagogical researchers”? What discoveries have you made and what difficulties have you encountered during this process?

Simona: I’m not sure of the extent to which I am able to grasp the profound meaning of the term “pedagogical researcher.” Thinking about myself and also my first experience here, yes, I think in the first few days I felt I was a researcher, but more in the sense of someone who was searching for solutions, even immediate ones. I was looking for something, and especially for someone who would say to me straightaway, “Do this, do that” or “Look, this is how we do things here.” I could see that the educators worked a lot in the daily life in the school, so I used to ask myself how you could reconcile so much action with the time needed for observation and reflection. I realized, perhaps wrongly, that I needed something that could be used immediately. During my studies at school, I had understood that that’s how it would work.

Amelia: What does all this mean to you? Can you give some examples, and tell us in more detail what you mean by “something that could be used immediately”?

Simona: I was expecting to be told what to do and why, I expected some guidelines that would give me specific instructions.

Orietta: Did you also expect someone to teach you what you had to do?

Simona: In some way, I did. The first few times I participated in the morning group assembly, for example, where all the children meet together (which I had already seen in other schools), I didn’t know where to start or how to interact with a large group of children. So I was expecting Diletta, the other teacher in the class, to say to me, “Look, this is how you should do it,” as if there were a formula. Since I was quite new to this type of situation, I wanted someone to tell me what to do straightaway.

Amelia: But what kind of relationship did you have with Diletta before you started teaching?

Simona: I arrived at the La Villetta School on September 1, when the children were already there, so there wasn’t really time for much communication between us. I came to school one day before the children arrived, but the classroom was being



organized and some things were being completed so that, frankly, there was no time to stop and explain. You had to understand and act at the same time, in the context of what was going on.

Amelia: Were there times, though, almost immediately afterward, in which people could discuss and share with you what the day was like at school?

Simona: Yes, but it wasn't enough, because there were still a lot of situations to take care of. It wasn't just the game of finding out who was at school and who was at home, or lunch time, or cleaning up the classroom, it was the whole complexity of the experience I had in front of me. Just to give you an example, in the morning, when we and the children were dividing into medium and small groups, I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure whether I had to follow a single group or walk around the groups. I felt that I didn't know how to organize myself or how to organize my thoughts and actions.

Amelia: So would you have liked someone to tell you what you had to do?

Simona: Yes, I felt that I wanted and needed it, because I didn't want to be seen as incompetent—even if my incompetence was due to my not knowing what had to be done, rather than to my unwillingness to do things. I am always a little bit intimidated in any situation, it's part of my personality. I don't want people to think that I can't do certain things because I don't want to do them; if I don't know how to do them it's because I don't know them.

Amelia: You seem to me to be afraid of how other people might judge you. Is that right?

Simona: Yes, always. I like other people to see that I can do things, but I think this can belong to everybody. I worry that other people may not understand that you need time, even a long time. But often, because work situations are constantly going on, we can't be given this time.

Amelia: Going back to your experience in this new context, did the passing of time make a decisive difference?

Simona: Yes, I realized—and this is my own assessment—that later in the daily life of school, and also when I was involved in other situations, whenever I set myself the goal of documenting and doing small investigations with the children, I felt more confident. Perhaps by acting and doing things myself, I no longer needed someone to say to me, “Look, this is where you have to start” or “Do this, do that.” Maybe all I needed was input and then I would face the situation in my own way, as I had seen it done and as I felt like doing it myself. I have no doubt in my mind that doing things and working in the field were important to me.

Amelia: I want to go back to the original question: What strategy did you find helpful in discovering your attitude to be one of “permanent research”?

Simona: As we were speaking just now, I was considering the extent to which I've had to assess myself, and as a result have had to become more aware of what was happening. I think that being aware of things helps you to focus on the problems, because it obviously gives you a certain kind of perspective: you are aware, and as a result you have to make choices, therefore you have to learn to make choices. So you keep going on and the experiences begin to take shape. I think these reflections are an important aspect of self-assessment and of the ability to review what you do and why you do it, in a meta-cognitive way. If I was feeling like a "floating soul" during the first few days in the classroom, a few days later I was becoming more aware of what was happening. Maybe this "floating" feeling is also part of being in a condition of research. Perhaps that's just how you are when you are researching. You approach everything with different levels of awareness and then you go back to it with practical reflections. In my view, daily practice and reflection are definitely essential: they allow me to internalize the things I do.

Amelia: Did the images and knowledge of the Reggio experience you already had help you in any way?

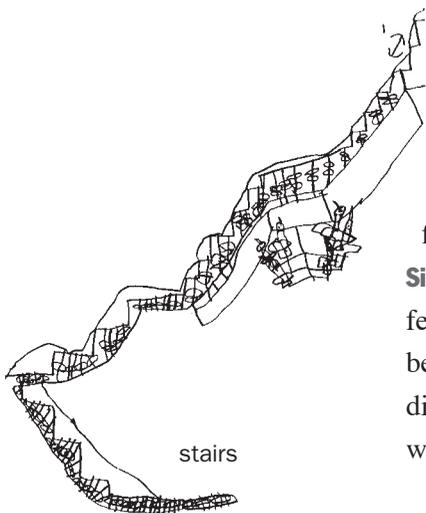
Simona: I felt that my knowledge was superficial, and then, when I realized that the philosophy of the Reggio schools was part of a daily practice of constantly elaborating contents, it wasn't easy to make connections between what I already knew and the work I was doing at school.

Amelia: And what about the difficulties? Could you talk about the first difficulties you have encountered in this process?

Simona: As I said before, the difficulty of not finding answers to everything immediately was a serious problem. It was based in part on my own expectations, perhaps, but it was also a difficulty because I couldn't find everything right away. Maybe I didn't have enough time to exchange thoughts with Diletta. I was still thinking in terms of sitting at the table, with her doing the talking while I would be writing, and of her giving directions for me to follow and put into practice. Another difficulty was finding the courage to ask people in the school other than my classroom colleague Diletta for explanations.

Amelia: Can you explain more clearly what you mean by the difficulty of finding the courage to ask other people in the school for explanations?

Simona: I didn't feel up to it and wasn't able to interpret my unease. I couldn't feel the solidarity of the group. I think this was because I was worried about being judged, and maybe I felt I was bothering people. One of my biggest difficulties was my fear of encountering any possible misunderstandings. Also, what could I have asked? I felt I didn't know where to start. I had a long list of



questions. I wanted to know this and that and more; I wanted to know everything.

Paola: What about the procedures? More specifically, which and how many things were you curious about?

Simona: I remember something Diletta told me on the first day I arrived at the La Villetta School. She said, “Observe Paola very closely because Paola is a very good teacher; I learned a lot from her.” So I thought that observing the way my colleagues with more experience went about their work could certainly help me, because I realized there was no single theory that could explain to me how to operate in practice. So I observed, I tried to understand, and I started to build relationships.

Amelia: This seems to me to be an excellent strategy. I’ve applied it on other occasions too and I continue to apply it to my work: I observe others a great deal because I think I can learn an enormous amount from the things I am able to see. Yet it’s also true that, in a sense, there’s something reciprocal in observation. I find it helpful to feel that I’m being observed; it makes me feel valued, or rather, it makes it easier for me to capture the valuable aspects of my actions.

Orietta: The way I experience the action of observing is as a more immediate way of learning and perhaps a more reflective one. You look at how the other person is doing something, you internalize it, make it your own, and put it into practice, not only according to general procedural attitudes but also according to your own interpretations.

Amelia: Don’t you all think that these processes that we call observation and documentation of particular situations were already under way within yourselves?

Simona: In my case, perhaps they were. I was looking at everything from the panels on the wall, to my colleagues, to the children, to the physical spaces. Perhaps I wasn’t always aware of doing this, because actually, at the beginning, I used to ask myself, “Why is this done this way?” or “Why is the furniture arranged this way?” And my curiosity kept growing.

Amelia: I think what you’re saying is really important, because it suggests that the role of observation is not just when you have a video camera, a tape recorder, or some other tool in your hands. It’s as if there were another tool of documentation that consists of the way in which we experience our actions and the way we learn to ask ourselves questions—which is itself already part of the concept of learning. I think that when we are aware of the situation we are experiencing, and are choosing the things we observe, we are already documenting. You were observing yourself in a new stage in your life; therefore you were interpreting, giving answers, and trying to find situations that you



A meeting is organized for the new teachers to reflect and exchange thoughts on the first few days of school with the children.



A few days later, the teachers meet to examine documentation material from the school archives regarding the “settling in” period. The teachers who were directly involved in the experience comment on this material.

could analyze. This way, you were reflecting; and I’m sure you were writing a lot as well.

Simona: Yes, it’s true. I was writing a lot and felt the need to write as a way of leaving traces of what was happening and what I was seeing. I remember I had my own diary, in which I noted down sentences, thoughts, comments, and ideas that came to me and that I would then share with my colleagues.

Paola: If I think back to my first experiences here, one very important thing to me was to have questions to ask. I used to find it difficult to ask questions and to find questions to ask. Then, with time, it became much easier for me to think of questions. So even asking yourself questions, finding questions that might have seemed to me to be the right ones, or that could help me to find a strategy to identify some of the answers, even this wasn’t such a straightforward step.

Amelia: If you were to share something with your colleagues in the United States that might be helpful to them, what kind of importance would you give the role of observation?

Simona: I would give it a great deal of importance. I’m thinking of observation and also observing the other teacher. There were also a lot of other things that were helpful to me and might be helpful to others, like participating in the professional development sessions or in specific professional development events and initiatives like the showing of videos, even though I didn’t find these in particular very helpful. I remember meetings we had in which we were shown a video or a slide documentary with the teachers explaining it. It was something quite unusual for me and I didn’t feel particularly involved in it. I felt more like a spectator.

Amelia: In your opinion would it have been more helpful to you if it had been done in a different way? You said you were shown a slide documentary or a video and the teachers were explaining them. Do you think there might have been a different way of showing the documentaries that would have been more helpful to you?

Simona: Just yesterday I was looking through the notes I took during the showing of a documentary. We discussed a lot of complex concepts such as generative questions, for example, hypotheses for projects, documentation, participation. Maybe the important thing for me would have been to have the opportunity to ask more questions while the documentaries were being shown, but especially to have some clarifications straightaway.

Amelia: I agree with you. Based on my own experience both in Reggio and the United States, questions have always helped me a lot, the questions I asked and those that others asked me. In my more recent experiences in the United

States, for example, the questions that teachers asked enabled me to understand the way they were interpreting and understanding, what their thoughts and understandings were “lingering” on. I think that from the questions that others ask you, you improve your understanding of who you are, what you are doing, and why you are doing it. Therefore it really does become an occasion of reciprocal exchange. In this respect, I’d like to emphasize how important the questions raised by new teachers and their comments really are: their perspective has not yet entered our understanding, but it does bring in a particular understanding.

Another important occasion in our experience that I believe contributes significantly to our professional development is when we organize a visual document such as a slide show or a video. Indeed, I think that making a slide show, a video, or a publication means having the opportunity to construct a sort of “reflective space” that stands between ourselves and our action. A space where, to an extent, we can “invite” other people’s contributions and comments. This is why a documentary or a publication is also an unfinished experience.

Teresa: Did you find the production of documentaries to be a milestone for yourself as well? When did you start producing them in Reggio?

Amelia: It’s not so easy to recall experiences that go back such a long time without any supporting documentation, but I seem to remember we started right from the very beginning, precisely because I have no clear idea of a definite beginning. I have so many precious memories of my first experiences with Loris Malaguzzi and my colleagues. We spent entire afternoons examining in detail the children’s drawings, photographs, and conversations. I recall the great efforts we made together to try to interpret different situations without ever taking anything for granted.

I remember how demanding Loris Malaguzzi was, but also the profound respect he showed for the teachers’ opinions. He always required us to make a great effort, but the satisfaction we accomplished gave us a new image of the work we were doing, which also involved achievements, fun, the pleasure of doing things, the joy of learning, and discovering new worlds.

Barbara: Is the strategy of producing slide shows or videos or publications as a tool for professional development also used by foreign experiences that take their inspiration from the Reggio approach to pedagogy—say, those in northern Europe, Sweden, the United States, and Albania?

Amelia: I think it’s a very widely used strategy. When, for example, I work in a school abroad for a period of time, after I’ve established a relationship with the teachers, I often ask them to put together a documentary research project. Instead of talking about what they did in the school using only the verbal

language, I ask them to do so by means of a short video or short slide shows, so that they can narrate their experiences using different languages. Otherwise I ask them to take me to visit the environment in their schools and to present to me the things they've done that are visible inside the spaces through different types of documents. I've noticed how this kind of work gives the teachers greater opportunities to allow new identities within themselves to emerge. It also seems to me that my own contribution to their experiences becomes more articulate and allows problems to emerge more forcefully. I know that other colleagues of mine also use these strategies in their work.



The new coteachers view and discuss documentation produced at the school in previous years.

Barbara: I find what you are saying and the procedures you describe very interesting. Going back to the aspect of making a video, not so much the construction stage but the final product, I remember that at first I used to watch them a little passively, because I didn't know what to observe. Looking at something is one thing, but observing, capturing something specific rather than the whole thing is quite different. I don't know if I'm making myself clear, but I wanted to point out that during those experiences, more than having questions I found I was reflecting on things. For example, watching the documentary about a day at school, I realized the extent to which I was taking for granted the children's arrival at the school, the transition time, the morning group assembly, lunchtime, and so on. I didn't have any questions then and there, but later, after reflecting for a while, I thought more deeply, for example, about the role the teacher might have. I reflected on this and then asked myself: in some cases, on certain specific occasions, what could I have done? I had great admiration for the teachers' capabilities, I admired the children's potentials and competencies and was amused by them. But until I tried myself, I didn't understand how I should be proceeding.

Amelia: Do you think it would be important to have time to look at these kinds of documents over and over again?

Barbara: Yes, this would help in reflecting more deeply on the experience. I think having time to reflect is very important to me. Just now I was referring to the video documentary, but personally I think it's extremely important to reflect, and consequently having the time to do so is very important too. The need for the time to reflect, to formulate questions, to understand and develop ideas, to consolidate, all this makes me feel that the time factor certainly seems to be very significant in learning processes. And I mean time in every respect— even the time to communicate, for example.

Teresa: Going back to my own experience, I remember that I was really being involved in everything right from the beginning. Indeed, I'd say I was overwhelmed from the first few days.

Amelia: Why do you say overwhelmed?

Teresa: Overwhelmed... perhaps because I got here when school had already started. It was October 12, so everything was already in motion; a range of initiatives, activities, work in progress... Then I arrived, and I remember that my colleagues did explain things, but that was never enough for me. It seemed that a lot of things were taken for granted, as if I was supposed to know them already. But even if I did know them, I didn't know how to experience them, making them part of my own life in the school; I had to learn them day by day. Not to mention my first encounter with all the children! I was attracted to them, excited by them, but I was also scared of them, in a way ... I was kind of afraid... My relationship with each child taken individually was more than enjoyable and rich, but coping with all of them together... Reflecting on all that now suggests to me that the main thing you have to do is look for the things you need to learn, the things you need to know, what you need to be able to do, what your approach should be.

Amelia: But more than anything else, it's important to know that these are not things that you know just once and for all. What is important is redefined in each particular situation. That's why, and I emphasize this again, a young teacher's perspective is helpful to us: it's an opportunity to reappraise what really is important. What did you try to do, for example?

Teresa: I had a tendency to observe everything. It was difficult to choose and therefore I felt more and more the need to exchange views with others. I think it's only by exchanging views with others that you can gain a better understanding of what you should be observing.

Amelia: So it was the time for communication that you felt you were lacking; and as you were saying before, it was this attitude of taking things for granted that contributed to your difficulties.

Frankly, I realize how many mistakes I made, too, when I was relating to others without giving enough weight to this problem of taking things for granted. We who work in Reggio, especially when we have a great deal of experience behind us, run the risk of really taking a lot of things for granted. Sometimes, even the language we use to express our thoughts is filled with an inherent complexity and is extremely elaborate. When I was here in Reggio, working at the La Villetta School, I used to do that too. But when I went to the United States I reflected on this aspect and became more self-critical. I asked myself more often than before why I was saying some things, where they were coming from, and from what context they had emerged. "Taking things for granted," even in its positive value of implying group agreement, can sometimes become an obstacle to communication. If one of the principal objectives, when you are relating to

others, is to be in touch with them, then you have to find various strategies to do so. If you take things for granted and the other person simply keeps quiet because he or she, not understanding what you mean, doesn't have the courage to speak, then that person ends up thinking that you are more intelligent than him or her, more knowledgeable, and so on. I don't think continuing in this way gets you anywhere.

Teresa: I agree with you, but then with me it's also a question of my personality. I'm really afraid to ask even simple questions. But if I were to go back now, I wouldn't do what I did then. I'd ask more questions because I realized that, in the end, I lost out by not asking them. I see now that the less you ask questions, the less you have answers back, and then your problems stay with you and grow bigger. You are also left with many doubts, but maybe this is a good thing, too.

Amelia: Do you think it would have been helpful to you if you'd had somebody else watching you during your own learning processes, someone who would give you immediate feedback on what you were doing and ask you to give reasons for what was happening?

Simona: It would have helped, for sure. Maybe the fact of being observed, being "documented" in a way, would have made me feel embarrassed; it would probably also have held me back a bit. But it would have made me reflect, too, on what I was doing, or rather, what we were doing. It's true that we observe the children, and it's just as true that they also observe us. Quite wrongly, I was more afraid of being observed by the adults than by the children, but as time went by, I learned to want children to observe me. Sometimes talking to your colleagues is not enough. Then you find that the atelierista or another colleague with more experience can help you, particularly someone who's had the opportunity of reflecting on what you've been doing. There have been times when I would tell myself over and over that I was ignorant.

Amelia: You mean in the sense that you didn't know things and were ignorant of them.

Simona: In the sense that I was also ignorant of the thoughts of others. Perhaps I didn't understand them. But I'd like to say something more about observation and feeling observed. If I think about what happened, I realize that, to an extent, I was aware of the fact that I was being observed. Whether intentionally or not, someone would always be observing me. The children were observing me first of all. It would have been helpful for me to have a person by my side who, on observing me, could intervene by saying things like, "You know, you're doing this wrong" or "You shouldn't be acting this way in this situation."

Giovanni: Is that how you perceived the person who was observing you? Was it

so that he or she could say whether or not you had gone wrong?

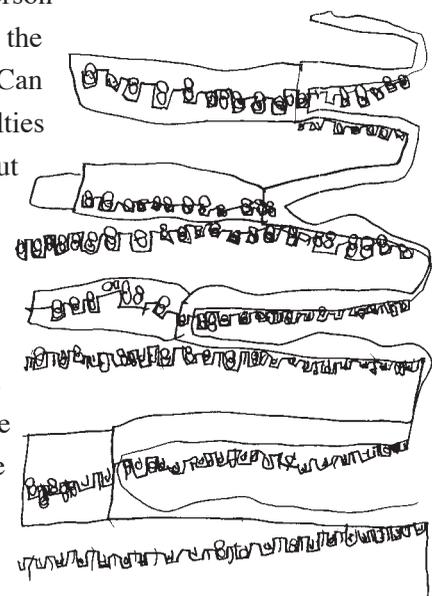
Simona: Yes, that was probably what I expected and what I probably felt I needed at the time.

Giovanni: To me, this context of observation implies that the other person observes you not to pass judgment but to help you identify and examine the causes and effects of some of the problem areas arising from a particular situation.

Orietta: Talking about examining the problems in a particular situation, I would add my own reflection here: being observed helped me a lot. Perhaps I was helped by having someone in my classroom who was newer to the school than I was, and where I was the “point of reference.” I remember that the first thing I said both to Barbara (her coteacher during the 1998-1999 school year) last year and to Ramona (her coteacher in the 1999-2000 school year) this year was, “You should often ask me things because I may take them for granted.” So the fact that they would ask me “Why are we doing this?” gave me the opportunity to go back and together with them reconstruct the way things had evolved, doing things the way we were talking about earlier. It gave me the opportunity to understand the reasons for things and to build a mutual understanding.

Amelia: I very much identify with this kind of approach as well. That’s what I did when I was in Washington, D.C. (Amelia consulted with the Model Early Learning Center of Washington, D.C. from 1993 to 1996) and found I was beginning to become more aware of the reasons why I was acting the way I was, and aware of the questions that emerged. This was an extremely important step for me. It’s exactly what you were referring to earlier: this kind of situation is extremely helpful. I think it helps you to grow and it helps the other person to understand what he or she is doing and be aware of it. Going back to the issue of professional development, is there anything else we can add? Can you describe your experiences—the gratifications, challenges, and difficulties you experienced when documenting the children’s learning processes, but also from your own learning process?

Simona: At the beginning, when Giovanni and I were observing the same group of children in the atelier and he used to share his reflections with me, it seemed that I didn’t have anything of my own to share with him. That was because I couldn’t express myself and I used to say to myself, “it seems as if I have been observing something else entirely.” I was there with my eyes, looking at these children moving around, I would write down their conversation, for example, but I wasn’t able to interact with them or to make any comments. Most of all, it seemed that Giovanni and



stairs

I were observing different things!

Amelia: Why do you think that was?

Simona: Because I wasn't able to see. I was only seeing the things I was capable of seeing.

Amelia: Do you think that Giovanni is capable of seeing things? Why do you think that is?

Simona: Yes, I think he is, because he has a lot of experience and he's also had many opportunities to reflect with others. I think Giovanni is capable of supporting the children's actions, getting them involved and making them feel that they are taking an active part in whatever they are doing.

Amelia: From your point of view, why do you think this happens?

Simona: Maybe because Giovanni has a model in mind, or perhaps because he can adapt his contribution concerning the situation using his past experiences. Perhaps he has a mental map of how to act, based on the things he's observing, which he's relating to his previous experiences.

Amelia: So you think he has a map. Can you elaborate on this?

Simona: I think he has several cognitive maps that can be adapted to the different contexts and that derive from his experience. I've also noticed that Giovanni has the ability to follow other people's thoughts without steering them in a particular direction. It's like sustaining the other person's action based on a prior intuition of how the situation might evolve, in order to be aware of what will be important to observe later on.

When I was first observing and documenting, I had the impression that I was missing everything. I found it difficult to write quickly, and then, at a later stage, I was given a camera. When I was taking photographs I was missing the dialogue, which was a terrible thing for me because I thought I was missing everything. To me, missing one of the children's words meant missing everything, so I used to write an enormous amount and my documenting was



In the atelier, Simona documents the construction of a robot in paper by a group of three girls, with Giovanni present.



She transcribes what she observed during the development of the project.



Simona and Giovanni compare their interpretations.

limited to transcribing the children’s verbal dialogues. Then I placed the tape recorder next to me and I had sheets of paper with different types of observation grids. I had to follow the children and I wanted to follow the relationships they were building, the ways in which the children were moving inside the group. I had a lot of things to deal with all at the same time, and I couldn’t do it because I wasn’t able to have all the tools that I had intended to use under my control. I think I was capturing neither the children’s hypotheses nor the strategies they were using, nor was I able to see whether they were influencing one another. Perhaps I was registering and not documenting. I could see that both the adults and the children were adopting certain strategies, but I wasn’t able to keep up with the timing of their actions.

Giovanni: With respect to the children, the competencies they were demonstrating through their strategies, and the construction of their theories, to what extent do you think all this can be related to your image of the child at the time?

Simona: Very much. Yes, I was familiar with the theories related to the image of the child, but that wasn’t enough. It was as if I was never able to see enough.

Amelia: Did you not credit the child with so many competencies?

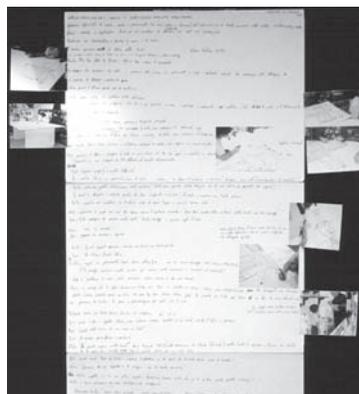
Simona: I don’t think I did. Obviously, without knowing it, I had a strong stereotype image of the child as an “empty vessel to be filled”—in the same way that I had a stereotype image of the adult as someone who, rather than sustaining action, would steer it in a certain direction, guiding and leading the other person to where he or she (the adult) wanted it to go.

Orietta: Which, unfortunately, is what we were taught at school as professional development. As you know, a major debate is going on, not only in Italy, about the quality of professional development today.

Simona: Yes, unfortunately that’s been our school experience. It was rather lacking in content, analysis, and ability to identify and examine the causes and effects of the problems you encounter in teaching.



Curious about the observation documents, the children ask the teachers to explain them.



Teresa: My experience was somewhat different from Simona's. I worked mainly with just one child, a child with special needs. I used strategies that were somewhat different, I daresay more spontaneous, that I thought were more suited to the particular situation.

Amelia: What do you mean by "more spontaneous" and "more suited to the situation"?

Teresa: I was referring to strategies that were more immediate. I was finding immediate answers to the situation in hand.

Diletta: It seems to me that you had to analyze the situation and then you had to make choices.

Teresa: Yes, I realized that I had to apply certain observation strategies in order to understand what was happening. I had to make a choice and then act. Thinking about that now, perhaps I was too absorbed in the situation. But I was documenting, I was making choices from the multitude of events and gestures to be documented.

Giovanni: I think she's constructing a set of parameters to refer to. She may not always have been aware of it, but she was drawing them up, meaning that she was evaluating and making choices.

Paola: I think that within these processes a constant activity of self-assessment and assessment is going on.

Teresa: And my self-assessments were often negative, both those about myself and about the expectations I had of the child concerned.

Amelia: Did you feel inadequate perhaps?

Teresa: I certainly didn't feel I was up to the situation, because I felt that in the majority of cases my expectations were also based on certain prejudices.

Amelia: It seems to me that you were harsh and almost ruthless judges of yourselves!

Orietta: Yes, it's true. Talking about this, I'm thinking of an example that may be banal, but in the context of the family, when a parent says to you, "Look, you shouldn't do certain things because..." this leads you to rebel, to want to decide for yourself because you don't accept other people telling you what you do, even if it's your parents. The "other" person, with his or her behavior, will always be there for you to refer to, but still, you need to have a certain independence of judgment and of thought that you acquire over time and through your own experiences.

Amelia: I like to think I need the other person because I believe that other person can suggest a different point of view.

Giovanni: It seems to me to be very important because acknowledging differences and the need to be open to the thoughts of others are essential elements in

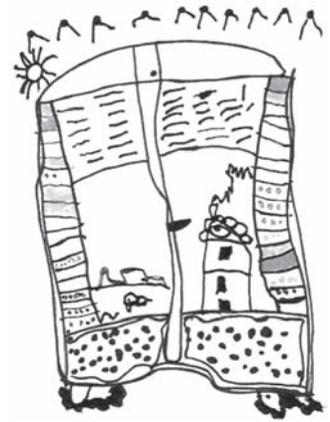
order to have a future. We need to have a future that, through difference, is capable of welcoming the potentials that other people bring. This is something that applies to children, it applies to adults, and it should apply to the context.

Amelia: I was wondering to what extent people who have experience, this kind of experience, are capable of listening when new people come into the school; to what extent they put themselves in a condition or a situation of listening; to what extent they know how to listen to what the other person brings in and know how to learn from the other person. I think there's a lot to learn from people who are new to the experience, precisely owing to the fact of their being new. Even at Reggio Children, when I work with my young colleague Paola, listening to her views helps me enormously to understand my own view better. It helps me to understand how fossilized I can be about certain issues; how I may be wrong about them because I'm not flexible enough in taking the situation on board; and how I carry within myself evaluations that are sometimes presumptuous and at other times stereotyped. Having a long experience can carry some of its own risks. The problem I'm raising here is the extent to which we are able to put into practice the concept of listening—and I put myself in the shoes of those who have more experience—listening to the other person and not seeing him or her simply as a “weak link” that you have to “train.” It may happen, just as it may happen in relation to the children, that you can't and aren't able to listen.

Paola: Though observation, in a sense, is a way of listening. If I think about my own experience as a teacher, I found it very helpful when someone was looking at me and observing me. Then later, discussing things with that person, I'd understand things that I hadn't seen before, so the following time I was encouraged to observe the details more closely. Of course, sometimes I became discouraged; but I used my frustration as a resource, because I would set myself the task of trying to think about things in more depth.

Giovanni: I think this question of feeling evaluated belongs to the nature of the relationship. It's not only the new person who is in a situation of disparity, but the other person too, who possibly for the first time has to set about building a relationship with another person. So we can say that it's the possibility of finding the right balance in the mutual relationship; and this isn't easy. Even with my own long experience, I think it's something that still needs to be reinforced.

Amelia: I'm wondering to what extent, for a person who's just beginning to teach, the fact of being with someone who has twenty-five years of experience and feeling a disparity or a difference resulting from the fact that one person has experience and the other doesn't, can create obstacles in mutual understanding.



window

Giovanni: It's certainly a significant factor that should be taken into consideration. Also, to this difference in experience you still have to add other differences, which can be personal differences or related to people's backgrounds.

Amelia: I was wondering, though, to what extent the other person, meaning the one who has more experience, is able to convey the idea that he or she is also undergoing a process, and that experience acquires greater value if one has the ability to keep oneself alive within the process and within change.

Giovanni: I think this was a problem for me, because I wasn't able to show Orietta that the process I was undergoing was in perfect synergy with her own. While she was interacting with the children, I was observing the relationship between her and the children so that we could discuss it later. We had shared this approach beforehand. Obviously sharing something like this at the beginning isn't enough, you also have to put it into practice during the experience in an interactive way. I wasn't only documenting the things that the children were doing, I was also documenting the relationship between her and the children, which was going to be the subject of our discussion. We did discuss it later, and at that point my lack of immediate interaction with her at the time led to a less positive appreciation of my presence during the work. I think that being openly interactive with the other person is essential during the process itself and is crucial when two people work together.

Paola: But it's a different kind of experience when two people are together, as Simona and I were in the mini-atelier the first time the children built a bridge, for example, and we had agreed to use two different types of documentation strategies in order to compare them in the end. We wanted to compare her type of documentation with mine, to understand what it might offer in terms of interpreting what had happened. As the work progressed, we had to find times in which, every now and then, we would look at each other and understand whether we had to stop or go on. I remember that in some situations we didn't know what to do.

Diletta: All of this also requires a high degree of complicity, exchanges, comparisons, and reciprocity—which you only acquire over time and with experience, all within the overall context of a collaborative approach.

Amelia: In a lively educational community such as ours, what has it meant to you and what does it mean to be part of a group, a group of people who are learning together?

Simona: First of all, it's a way of really making you feel that you're part of a group: it's a way of feeling that you share things with others, and that others perceive you as being part of the group and are willing to help you. That way you overcome the problems together and you feel more accepted. There's

something that school, and perhaps life itself, hadn't helped me to understand, and that is the importance of making mistakes: learning to use mistakes as a resource, the importance of exchanging views with others and finding strategies and solutions together. If I had to start over again today, I wouldn't be afraid any more of a situation like the one I experienced. If there wasn't anyone there to help me deal with it, I would accept the situation, I'd ask for help and support, I would understand the situation and see it more positively.

Orietta: I would also consider from a more open point of view the fact of being observed by a critical eye, and therefore the open possibility of being interpreted negatively, too. I would see this now as something that could help me to grow. I've realized how all this can help you in the search for your own identity, both your professional and your personal identity.

Paola: I, too, believe that being part of a learning group helps you in the constant search for your own identity. The critical perspective of others offers further building elements for the complexity of the situation.

Diletta: I agree with you because when you understand and live through these kinds of experiences positively, you also understand that you are being given a certain amount of didactic freedom. You have the opportunity to learn, while knowing that you can rely on others and no longer need to be afraid of their judgment. I think this applies to parents, too.

Giovanni: I think this is really important if we consider families as being part of the learning group as well. Have there been any occasions, in your admittedly short experience, when in your exchanges with the parents you have felt that the groups of parents represent a group learning situation?

Orietta: Yes, there have been, because parents give you a picture of things that have their own history, their own idea of family-based experience in relation to the children, and you have your own, as a more or less experienced teacher. In my view, the family is part of the learning group because it's complementary; it completes your perspective, or it helps you broaden your horizons from the factors you are familiar with as a teacher and offers other points of view.

Amelia: And is this how you've felt about the situation with the families right from the beginning?

Orietta: In some cases I did, but at other times I also experienced it as a test, meaning that I saw the parents as people to whom you had to give a report. At times I perceived it almost like an... interference, something else to have to cope with, and then I felt myself inadequate for the role I was responsible for. At the beginning I perceived mostly my lacks, of which there seemed to be an awful lot, and all very obvious, too. I thought I was noticing some almost inquisitive looks by the parents; I was conscious of them and also felt

One of the methods of professional exchange among teachers with different levels of experience is to document the teacher who is interacting with and documenting the children. Orietta and Giovanni decide to document how the children design and produce a message for their friends and to present their documentation during the class meeting with the families.



Orietta and the children prepare the materials for making the message.



Giovanni observes and documents the words and gestures of the children and the teacher, making written notes and taking photographs.

uncomfortable because the opinion of the parents was important to me.

Teresa: I was afraid of their judgment, especially since my role was a bit more marginal, in the sense that I was a support teacher. So the parents didn't relate to me directly. At times, in fact, I also felt a bit excluded by the parents, and seen by them as more of an external figure, and therefore a little more like an outsider whose presence might be almost unimportant.

I think at the beginning the parents had to get to know what my role in the class was, what kind of relationship I had with the other two teachers and with the children. These were all things that had been explained to the families, but I think that the parents wanted to see and understand them by themselves through the actual work of the school. I also felt I was being observed. During my time of getting to know the new experience in the school, I also had to take this factor into account, and it really wasn't easy.

However, over the course of time, we did find some adjustment mechanisms that helped us to get to know and respect one another, and this is true of the parents, the children, and my colleagues.

Simona: I think that the time you spend within the evolving experience gives value to your work and that of others, and acts as a complement in creating a deep sense of belonging to what you do. It also helps you to understand the reasons why you do things and gives you a greater deal of awareness.

Now that I am more able to distance myself, emotionally as well, from my early experience, I am able to appreciate all its inherent value and richness. I feel that I have a positive baggage of experience that will help me to approach new experiences in a way that is more constructive and open both to myself and to others. I feel that my personal and professional development has been enriched also by the obstacles I've had to overcome, the mistakes I've made and have realized I made. The important thing is not to feel discouraged, but



The next day, Orietta and Giovanni compare the documents they have produced in order to share them with their colleagues during the weekly staff development meeting.



The observations compiled by Orietta and Giovanni are examined by their colleagues, and this exchange enriches the material with new points of view.



Brief summaries of the observations are given to the parents, so that they feel involved and can add their own interpretations.

to learn to see problems with greater optimism. This helps you to grow and gives you more strength to be able to deal with your work and with your life.

These conversations then continued in the course of the school year and left significant traces on our learning processes and our personal and professional development.

Realizing the importance of building one's experience within the daily life of the school, through ongoing sharing and exchange with others, has underscored once again how essential it is for us to learn to take on responsibilities, with a constant effort to analyze and develop. This also helps us not to give up in the face of difficulties, and is an important message for the new teachers as well. This shared experience, this process of constant dialogue with others, made up of exchanges and sharing of ideas and opinions, negotiations, agreements, and disagreements, has given new value to the context of our personal and professional lives, enriching our different personalities with new elements. It has meant documenting our ongoing learning processes as well as constantly "documenting" our own lives. It has also meant thinking about documentation as an opportunity to define the quality of our work and our development; as an act we owe to ourselves and which is necessary for us as teachers and people; as an act we owe to the children and the parents.

We hope that this wealth of knowledge will not be dissipated but will stay with us as our experiences evolve, helping us never to lose sight of the values of collaboration and learning as individuals in a group who see ongoing research as an indispensable part of their work.