

The Relationship Between Theory and Practice as a “Dance of Knowledge”

BY: DANIELA LANZI

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Dance Movements
Drawings by 5-year-old children of the
Michelangelo Municipal Preschool



Reflecting on the metaphor of the “dance of knowledge” as evoked in the thinking of Italian philosopher Mauro Ceruti, I would reaffirm that the question of the relationship between theory and practice has been a common thread in the thoughts, projects, daily life, and education of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia’s infant-toddler centers and preschools for over 60 years. For this reason, I will develop my reflection here starting from some of the key issues that we consider essential in our educational philosophy.

The relationship between theory and practice is always in relation to an idea of human being and of learning.

We feel it is essential to reaffirm that children are born with a powerful and extraordinarily dynamic genetic endowment, one that enables them to build meaningful relationships with the world. The neuroscience research to this effect tells of an extremely plastic mind and brain, capable of gathering and exchanging information and building indispensable and vital interactions. In particular, we know that the first 6 to 8 years of life are the most fertile and generative period.

The question of how knowledge is constructed and how the mind works is very topical today, thanks to the contribution of neuroscientific discoveries that confirm an integrated and complex vision of the human being and learning. This vision had already been intuited and expressed by Loris Malaguzzi with his theory of the *hundred languages*, which recognizes the freedom and legitimacy of each individual to learn in their own difference through multiple ways of accessing the world and knowledge. From this point of view, therefore, the what, the why, and the how of the opportunities and relationships offered to children are decisive. For us, this is a compelling perspective that entails—for those of us who work directly with children in this age group—a pedagogical, educational, cultural, and ethical responsibility.



Winter garden, Nilde Lotti
Municipal Infant-toddler Centre



Mini-atelier, 4-years-old's classroom,
Anna Frank Municipal Preschool

Today, more than ever, the infant-toddler centers and preschools are engaged in the challenge of creating contexts of experience and discovery characterized by multimodality, contexts in which the knowledge and learning processes of children and adults alike are an expression of their subjective differences. Social constructivist thinking offers an interesting perspective in this regard, where the idea of learning as a process of knowledge is not understood simply and primarily as giving children “generic” experiences, but as the possibility of revisiting experiences, reconstructing them, and re-signifying them into representations, ideas, and theories.

As Loris Malaguzzi pointed out, the crucial role of the social constructivist approach is to set up facilitating contexts and enriching situations that help children to be the authors of their own learning processes:

What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught. Rather, it is in large part due to the children's own doing, as a consequence of their activities and their own resources. . . . In any context, children do not wait to pose questions to themselves and form strategies of thought, principles, or feelings. Always and everywhere, children take an active role in the construction and acquisition of learning and understanding. (Gandini, 2012, p. 44)

The relationship between theory and practice is always connected to an idea of school, because it is embodied in the everyday life of the educational services and in the experiences of children, teachers, and parents.

Everyday contexts must be conceived as places and opportunities for fertile communicative interactions, a potential for generating multiple accesses to individual and group knowledge and to relationships.

At the infant-toddler centers and preschools, these contexts are offered as essential opportunities for the children to familiarize and understand the experience, contexts that become “maps” where imitation, learning, and communication are strategies in which experience and knowledge can be shared. We can only know reality by modifying it with our knowledge-seeking actions, taking responsibility for them and attributing meaning to them.

Loris Malaguzzi (1996) suggests:

Education must come to be recognized as the product of complex interactions, many of which can be realized only when the environment is a fully participating element. . . . We consider the environment to be an essential constituent element of any theoretical or political research

in education. We hold to be equally valuable the rationality of the *environment*, its capacity for harmonious coexistence, and its highly important forms and functions. Moreover, we place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options, and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security. (p. 40)

The relationship between theory and practice is always connected to an idea of the role of the teacher.

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opinion, in our view, this means epistemologically reframing the concepts of learning and teaching. This is why teachers should not just be executors (albeit “intelligent” ones) of programs and tools designed by others. Instead, they have the right and the opportunity, together with the other protagonists of the educational project, to generate a vital search for meaning and significance in the world. In this respect, observation and documentation are certainly valuable educational tools, but they are also epistemological frameworks that provide opportunities for reflection that can change the teaching practice and the cognitive processes of both children and adults.

We thus view **research** as an inalienable right of human beings, the vital essence of our nature as living beings and a cognitive tension toward the new and the unknown. Confirming the right to research in infant-toddler centers and preschools is an ethical and political choice to focus on the value of each individual in his or her being a relational subject, interdependent and connected to the web of relationships that every life brings. Proposing an idea of research as a systematically theoretical-reflexive and practical action, generative of a new culture of the human being and the world, becomes the indispensable vision of those who want to embark on the paths of the possible, in education as well as in every field of knowledge.

In conclusion, for me, this poetic idea of a “dance of knowledge” represents the idea of interpreting education—depending on the age of the children and youth—not only as a technical fact to ensure care, protection, and instruction, but also as a dimension that brings together a collective sense and a new idea of humanism.

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