

# Innovations

in early education: the international Reggio exchange

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## REFLECTIONS ON *INSERIMENTO*, the Process of Welcoming Children and Parents into the Infant-Toddler Center: An Interview with Lella Gandini

By Judith Allen Kaminsky

*Lella Gandini is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst School of Education and the Reggio Children Liaison in the United States for Dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach. She is the co-author with Carolyn Edwards of Bambini: The Italian Approach to Infant/Toddler Care. In Chapter 14 of Bambini, "Research as a Partnership for Learning Together: Studying the Growth of Relationships Inside the Nido," Lella and Carolyn describe their research in the infant-toddler centers of Pistoia, Italy. The following interview is based on excerpts from an interview by Lella, which was published in Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange, Volume 6, No. 1, Spring 1998, titled "The Experience of the Infant-Toddler Center in Reggio Emilia: Interview with Cristina Bondavalli" and a chapter by Chiara Bove in Bambini, titled "Inserimento: A Strategy for Delicately Beginning Relationships and Communications." Cristina Bondavalli was a teacher for four years at Peter Pan Infant-Toddler Center in Reggio Emilia and is currently working in the office of the superintendent of education for the municipality of Reggio Emilia. Chiara Bove is a graduate of the Institute of Pedagogy at the University of Milan, and consults with infant-toddler and preschool programs in several northern Italian cities. She participated in the collaborative research project on adult relations in Italian early care and education with Rebecca New, Susanna Mantovani and Bruce Mallory.*

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*Inserimento* (which can be roughly translated as "settling in" or "period of transition and adjustment") is our term for the strategy of beginning relationships and communication among adults and children when the child is entering an infant-toddler center or a preschool program for the first time. The Italian concept of *inserimento* indicates the initial delicate process of the child's adjustment into the new community.

-Chiara Bove, *Bambini*

**JUDITH:** *There is growing interest in the United States in the transition of infants, toddlers and young children into child care centers and preschools. What is your personal feeling about the practice of inserimento?*

**LELLA:** I believe that the practice of creating a careful, gradual transition at the beginning of a young child's experience in an infant-toddler center or preschool is psychologically sound. No doubt it contributes to the well-being of the child and the parents by giving a strong foundation to the development of the relationship of parent and child to the teacher and to the center itself.

In her interview, Cristina Bondavalli described the strategies designed in Reggio for the parents' first contacts to the infant-toddler center in this way: "Once the child has been accepted, the infant-toddler center invites the parents and the child to visit while the children are there, so that they can see the infant-toddler center when it is lived by the children. . . In the month of August, there is a meeting of the group of children and parents that will be coming to the *nido* [Italian term for the infant-toddler center. Literally, it means infants' nest.] in September. . . This first meeting helps to define the groups in each room. In August, before the opening of the infant-toddler center, there are individual meetings with families. These conferences are organized in order to establish dialogue for reciprocal sharing between parents and teachers of a particular child. . . Before the beginning of the school year, there is also a meeting of the parents and teachers of each classroom. In this meeting, parents and teachers decide the organization and the plan for the transition into the infant-toddler center. At this time, we also try to work out some strategies and the teachers try to understand the parents' thinking and expectations about this first beginning at the infant-toddler center."

**J:** *In your experience within the Reggio municipal infant-toddler centers, how do the parents generally respond to this intense way of introducing them to the life of the infant-toddler center?*

**L:** These many meetings indicate a strong interest in each individual child and the parents of that child. It is a very personal attention that the parents receive. This question relates to what Becky New describes in her article in *Young Children* (New, 1999). Becky believes that parents in the United States tend to more completely give the responsibility for their child to the center, in order to be able to attend to their own work. Becky also writes that American parents are more likely to object to spending time with their child in the center and to the number of meetings they are asked to attend.

I believe that parents everywhere feel ambivalent about separating from their child, even if they have opted for child care for the sake of the child's social development. Yet in these cities in Italy, parents thrive from the attention they receive within the infant-toddler center and preschool. In addition, these parents have found that attendance at the many meetings offers them reassurance about their child's life in the center or school. Furthermore, these parents want to be invited to contribute to the planning of their child's transition into the center and they enjoy helping the teachers to understand their child's needs.

Cristina described it this way: "We require the presence of one of the parents during their child's first few days at the infant-toddler center. We also ask the parents to offer their suggestions and strategies concerning their behavior with their child during these first days, in order to allow the child to have the possibility to get to know the other children, the teachers and the space of the infant-toddler center."

**J:** *Do families begin the transition process into the infant toddler center in small groups or all together at the start of the school year?*

**L:** Educators and parents in infant-toddler centers in different Italian cities have collaboratively developed various strategies. In some cities, the entrance into the center by individual families is staggered. In others, there has been a conscious effort to create a small group of parents with their infants, who are oriented together and live together through the experience of the transition, with particular meetings of parents only and some with the teachers. In these meetings, parents have the possibility to compare notes and support each other. This way, children, teachers and parents gradually construct the context of relationships. Certainly, the parents who have already acquired confidence in their transition, and the children who are getting to know the place and the daily happenings are ready to be helpful to the second group that enters the center.

In her interview, Cristina commented on the strategy of having parents entering in the infant-toddler center in small groups: ". . . small groups of children and small groups of parents begin together. . . The first group of children and parents has already been, in some way, familiar with the infant-toddler center and has a little bit more experience and, therefore, can help the second group. . . We want to try to create a relationship of knowing each other, trusting each other, comparing notes and exchanging ideas. We

want to build a relationship of participation and belonging that develops over time. During the families' very first days at the infant-toddler center, the transition or *inserimento*, we, as teachers, want to create a truly welcoming environment within each classroom and throughout the infant-toddler center. We want to communicate a sense that children and parents are welcome, expected and considered important."

**J:** *What factors have you found contribute to building a "relationship of participation and belonging" and "a sense that children and parents are welcome, expected and considered important?"*

**L:** I would like to refer to some interviews that Carolyn Edwards and I conducted with parents in Pistoia, as they were in transition into the *nido*. These interviews took place at the time Carolyn and I were involved in our research, which followed the development of relationships among parents, teachers and children from the beginning of their transition into the infant-toddler center until the end of their stay (when the children were six months of age to three years of age). The parents always described the first encounters with the environment and the teachers in very positive ways. Carolyn and I videotaped those encounters. It was very interesting to observe how each family had a particular way of entering in relationship and how each teacher found her own ways to initiate or respond to the parents and infants in order to create an opportune (tailored) welcoming situation.



I would like to share a brief episode that was video-taped and took place in an infant-toddler center:

A mother enters, as expected, into the infant-toddler center, carrying her baby Chiara. The teacher, Franca, meets them with a joyful smile and opens her arms to the baby, who willingly accepts being carried by the teacher. Right away, Franca starts to speak, including Chiara as if they were old friends, and as if the child was the guide to the center and host to her mother: "Now Chiara is going to show to mama her soft crib . . . Here she can open this cabinet, where there will be her change of clothing. . . Now, mama, look! Here are all of Chiara's and her friends' toys."

This way Franca, followed by Chiara's mother, reviews all of the room. Then Franca sits with Chiara on a soft foam mattress, where many toys are nicely collected in a basket. Chiara's mother follows this unspoken invitation and sits next to her. Chiara is between them and plays quietly with the toys, while Franca asks Chiara's mother questions about Chiara's favorite foods, how she likes to be eased into sleep and so on. The two women touch the little girl and hand her toys when they see she needs help. When questioned about her motivations for the choice of the *nido*, Chiara's mother says that she wants Chiara to be a social and outgoing little girl. At that point, Franca notices that Chiara is looking at a little boy who is in the room, so Franca invites the boy to come close and see Chiara's beautiful shoes. Then a silent little exchange between the two children takes place. The boy touches Chiara's shoes and Chiara pats the little boy on the head. Franca comments on how Chiara likes other children and how friendly she is.

In her interview in *Innovations*, Cristina reflected on her view, as a result of her work in Reggio, about the importance of creating a sense of belonging for children and parents: "I think it is very important for teachers to listen to children from the beginning, and not only in terms of verbal language because many of

these children have not developed their verbal language very much. It is important to listen carefully and observe what the children are communicating to us through many languages such as gesture, facial expression or other signals that may show curiosity, interest or well-being. Together, we also have to share and understand signals like crying and other moments of difficulty. The importance of listening and observing is connected with the spirit of transition, which cannot be defined with a precise beginning and a precise end."

**J:** *In your experience, how does this careful listening and observing influence the evolution of the inserimento experience for children and parents?*

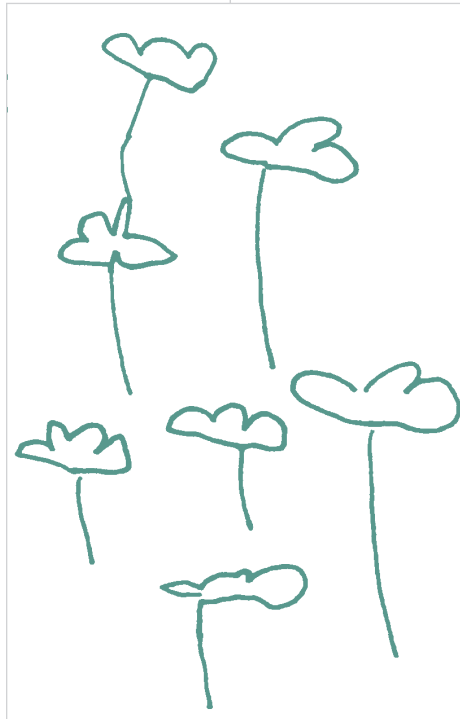
**L:** Parents and children are very sensitive to teachers' ways of listening to them, and the teachers are attentive to the signals of the parents and children. An attitude of interest and respect is essential for the path of *inserimento* to move in a positive direction.

**J:** *The environment of the infant-toddler center offers messages that both children and adults can "read." What are the aspects of the space, to which you pay particular attention? According to your experience, which are the aspects that tend to make parents feel accepted and invited to be part of the experience?*

**L:** Many educators have been very capable of making the messages of welcome "readable" to parents (and to anyone who

visits their centers). This is also something that many teachers in the United States have come to understand . . . the way that environment communicates through documentation. Often, it has been said that the environment of a center or a preschool is, in itself, documentation that communicates care and respect for children, teachers and parents or the lack of it.

Cristina said, "I think it is essential for the space of the infant-toddler center to transmit a sense of expectation and welcoming to parents and children. This space should communicate and we, as teachers, have to think very carefully about this. We want to create



communication so the relationships that are beginning will continue. Spaces can truly give this sense of continuity through communication and welcoming. . . I'm also thinking about spaces and places that are capable of being transparent and transmitting what is happening when the parents are not there. I'm thinking about a space where parents themselves feel accepted and welcome physically. For example, a place where parents can stop and sit and be together, to talk with the teachers and also with other parents that come into the infant-toddler center. This is a way for them to be sharing impressions and reflections with each other. . . For example, the entryway of the infant-toddler center is very important for communicating messages. But also, the entryway of each room should offer to parents who enter with the children, something that gives ideas about what teachers and children are doing. They should find their own children there through, perhaps, the journals of the teachers. They should also find information and images of what is happening inside the room and how the group is forming. A journal prepared by the teachers should communicate a sort of panoramic view of what is happening, the changes that are taking place in that room or section. I'm thinking about the visual documentation that can communicate micro-stories or little narratives about what happens among the children. Narratives can also be done visually - capturing through photographs - looks, gestures and interaction among the children."

**J:** *How does the research and experience of Chiara Bove in Italian infant-toddler centers compare with that of centers in Reggio and Pistoia?*

**L:** The experience of Chiara Bove, which she outlined in her chapter in *Bambini*, refers especially to a long period of study and research that she conducted in the infant-toddler centers of Modena, which are run by Laura Saitta. In Italy, there has been a long debate, and much research and experimentation with the transition into a new center by children and parents. But the study referred to in Chiara's *Bambini* chapter, guided and supported by Susanna Mantovani, has been the most thorough because it has included the careful attention to and deep analysis of the teachers' feelings and development of their mutual understanding with parents, especially mothers. This is often an overlooked part of the dynamic process of the protagonists of the transition process.

This is what Chiara said about the development of the transition and the teachers' learning in this process: "After a series of communications and visits between the family and the center, parents are invited to spend some time at the center with their child. During the first days, the parent and the child will remain for a few hours playing, observing and communicating with the teachers and other families. Day by day, parents and children increase their stay in the center until their full schedule is reached. . . With a great range of variation covered, parents' full-time presence may last from a minimum of a few days for some families to a maximum of several weeks for others. Thus, during the period of *inserimento*, the center staff provides for children to be cared for and nurtured by their parents in the out-of-home context. Although this privilege will not last forever, it gives young children an initial feeling of familiarity and emotional security that usually carries over when the parent is no longer present. These practices also aim to give teachers the opportunity to learn about individual patterns of interaction and about differences in parental style."

**J:** *What have you found to be the factors that determine the overall duration or variety of the parents' stay at the center?*

**L:** In my view, it is appropriate for the duration of the parents' stay at the center to be varied. If it is a transition respectful of the development of a sense of security and trust on the part of each particular dyad of parent and child, the individual differences will be many. There are parents who feel that when children endure and overcome sadness, they will grow and gain strength. This is a sentiment that other parents, especially parents of a first or only child, would find difficult to bear.

One influential factor that determines the duration or variety of the parents' stay is the parents' previous knowledge of the quality of that center. That is why, for example in the city of Pistoia, a great deal of effort is made to communicating to the community and to the city about the high quality of their infant-toddler centers. The Pistoia educators create occasions when those centers are open to the public, especially in the late spring, when registration begins. This is not done because of a lack of applications to the centers, but in order to let people know how well the children in the community are cared for, and how well they grow and learn.

**J:** *Can you offer some examples of patterns of interaction and differences in parental style that teachers can learn from parents?*

**L:** Many parents develop a distinctive way of holding their child. For example, some parents hold their child so that he or she can look at what is surrounding him or her. Others hold the child turned toward the parent. There are parents who develop a way to bounce their child on their knee, parents who offer toys and others who do so only when their child seems interested in a nearby toy. There are parents who talk to their child constantly, others who sing little songs and others who are very quiet. There are parents who handle their child in a very energetic way and others who handle the child very cautiously.

Educators learn a great deal by observing the parent and the child together at the center. They learn how a child likes to eat, what foods are favored and how best to ease the child to sleep.

**J:** *In her chapter, Chiara wrote, "As the center provides new children with prepared space that invites them to play with peers, it gives parents many opportunities to observe their own child's behavior in a social context." What are the benefits of parent observation of their own child's behavior in a social context?*

**L:** Many parents have no occasion to see their young child interacting with people outside the family, in particular, with other infants or young children. Through this experience, the parents will acquire a more varied and substantive awareness of the capability of their child to be engaged, and also a sense of trust for an environment that widens their child's possibility of growth.

**J:** *Chiara emphasized that the "importance of the mother's well-being, whether she is with or away from her child, is validated and taken seriously during the process of inserimento." What benefits have you observed as a result of this consideration of a mother's well-being along with the child's?*

**L:** A teacher, who is sensitive to young children, will take the new child through the transition while feeling and making known to the mother (or the father) that she (or he) is involved in making this transition a success. That is why the mother's well-being, which is also a consequence of trust, along with the teacher's

feeling that this is a cooperative endeavor, is an essential part of a good transition experience.

Chiara also wrote, "Both researchers and educators involved in practice related to infants recognize the value of parents' involvement during the process of transition. Moreover, most recently emerging is an interpretation of parents' involvement as a professional need for the teacher."

**J:** *Do you believe that parents' involvement is a professional need for the teacher? If so, why?*

**L:** I think that the basic value of participation and, therefore, mutual responsibility is paramount. In her 1999 article in *Young Children*, Becky New describes the American tendency of considering infant care as "an unpleasant necessity" yet in infant-toddler centers in some Italian cities, the adults involved strive to make this a shared, constructed, harmonious experience, even though it is sometimes difficult.

Chiara wrote, "Adults [both parents and teachers] achieve a sense of security by discussing, sharing and understanding their own feelings connected with leaving their child in someone else's care or, in the case of teachers, with taking on someone else's child. The experience of entering infant care can develop into a time and a place in which adults, gradually opening up to one another, can be partners rather than antagonists. In this situation, they can share knowledge rather than showing off competencies."

**J:** *How do you believe the image of parenthood has been strengthened through relationships among adults within Italian infant-toddler center communities?*

**L:** Parenthood can be a very lonely experience in many places in the western world. The experience in the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Italian cities, which have developed progressive and participatory public education programs for children, has provided a way to support parents, children and the extended families in a time when many families seem to be weakened by the pressure of contemporary life.

Chiara elaborated on this phenomenon: "The *asilo nido* - conceptualized and practiced as a place open to families - provides these adults with a variety of opportunities to share, debate and discuss the major



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-Lella Gandini

issues of their parental roles. At the same time, it provides them with a variety of occasions to observe others interacting intimately with their children. . . . The infant-toddler center is, for Italian parents, a place where one's image of parenthood can be supported and validated or modified through relationships with others. . . . Our practice of *inserimento* represents the process of transition into an infant-toddler center in the Italian cultural context, in which the idea of family generally represents a stable context of growth. The ideal Italian family has always centered on close, intense and daily relationship among family members (nuclear and extended). In other cultural contexts, different ideas and values about the family, and child growth and development pertain. . . . In Italy, therefore, the best way to provide a smooth separation into infant care is through building close, intense and daily relationships with child and family. *Inserimento* occurs as a culturally relevant answer to a culturally determined need. For Italians, the idea of *inserimento* refers to a complex event that reflects the mother's status in modern society as well as her possible multiple roles."

**J:** *If the process of inserimento in Italy is "a culturally relevant answer to a culturally determined need," what differences would you recommend for the welcoming process in infant-toddler centers in North America?*

**L:** As we have discussed, experience and research has shown that the process of *inserimento* or transition can develop with different strategies. It should be designed by parents and teachers together, considering the specific rights and needs of each family, and the context of care. In the United States, there is growing interest in the importance of parent participation, in general. In particular, there is new attention to the transition into infant-toddler centers. The separation, which is necessary when families trust their children to a child care center, should not be a painful experience. In fact, it should be part of the process of growing through the support of forming new and respectful relationships, based on the strength of those already present in the family. The tradition of positive North American family values can contribute strongly to successful transition into child care centers and preschools.



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