

On the Nature of Organization

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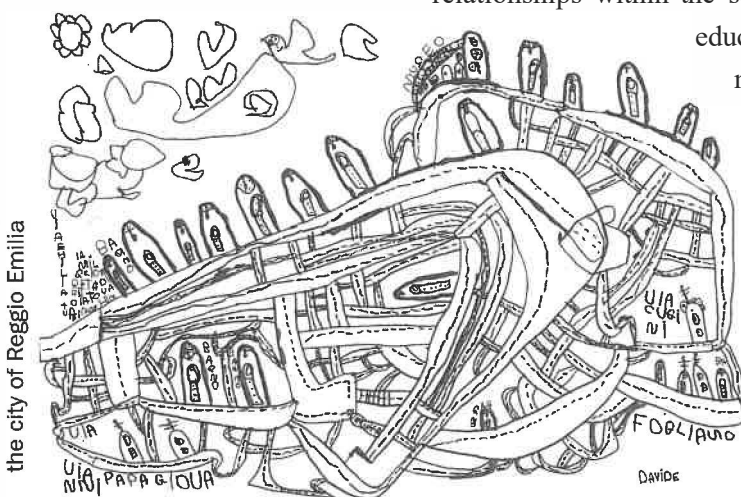
Organization, in the Reggio experience, has always been thought of as a constituent part of the identity of the school, an aspect that is bound to the values and choices of the educational project. For this reason, we offer a brief discussion of organization as an introduction to the following chapter, "Daily Life at School." We will examine some of the organizational choices that characterize our educational project and that we feel are particularly important for understanding the broad context that fosters individual and group learning. (For general information on the organization of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools of Reggio Emilia, see Appendix D.)

The quality of learning, especially that of learning to learn in a group, seems to be closely correlated to the quality of opportunities to share and participate in the daily life of the school. Building and maintaining relationships is the guiding thread that accompanies children through the various times, spaces, and activities of daily life; it is the main occupation to which they dedicate energies and passion from the moment of birth. Schools, on the other hand, too often dedicate their energies primarily to curriculum and didactics, neglecting the broad network of relationships and communication that are an integral part of the educational process, and consequently placing little emphasis on the organization of these relationships.

The "places" of education have never reached a clear consensus on the nature and role of organization. Traditionally, schools have constructed their identities and objectives by decontextualizing themselves, by separating the disciplines and fields of knowledge, and by being intolerant of any ambiguity or uncertainty. Organization, which is such an important aspect of the lives of individuals and societies, has generally been relegated to a secondary role of mere functionality, with little recognition of its ethical and educational value.

We believe that organization is in large part responsible for the quality of relationships within the school and therefore for the quality of the educational project itself. Organization involves more than just the structures of the school.

What makes the organization is the meaning given and the values ascribed to these structures by the subjects of a school. Organization involves working conditions, schedules, spaces, and decision-making processes, all of which are informed by and inform the values and relationships within an institution. In this way, the organization defines the



possibilities and realities of a school.

It is precisely for this reason that we have never delegated choices regarding organization-and these choices involve administrators, pedagogistas, teachers, school staff, and parents, though in their different competencies and roles.

Our experience has always been particularly sensitive to the constant interplay of theory and practice. We are convinced that the close alliance between the theoretical system and the practical-organizational system does not consist simply of implementing the theory correctly. Rather, it lies in the capacity to experience this alliance as a dynamic relationship in which theory and practice are reciprocally influenced, giving priority not to an "executive" intelligence but to a creative intelligence that attempts to construct, maintain, and renew this relationship of circularity and reciprocity.

We have tried to counter the culture of separation and dualism, starting with our image of the child, which has always underscored connection rather than parceling, and including our systemic view of the school. Seeing school as a system of communication and relationships was an initial choice that continues to characterize and distinguish our commitment to valuing, as well as putting into practice, the dialogic nature of the individual and of knowledge.

Within this systemic approach, which means that each part is involved in reciprocal relations with the others, organization is seen as the *progettazione* of these relationships (see page 17 for the definition of *progettazione*). It is as if a school were a large living organism whose parts (children, adults, schedules, spaces, and so on) relate to the whole not only because they are included, but also, we hope, because of a bond that embodies a common sense of belonging, the construction of shared stories, and intertwined destinies. In our experience, the aim of organization is to create a bond of interdependence that can give each subject the meaning of his or her presence and of the presence of the others.

We have tried to find a type of organization that is accepting and supportive but that also fosters these connections. Reciprocal enrichment can be achieved only within the connected and integrated points of view of the individual parts. Thus we have tried to create a network of participation that is the result of many different points of view.

We have paid particular attention to *how* the values and aims are connected to the design and organization of work, schedules, spaces, school environments, activities, staff development, family participation, and relations with the city. This is in order to welcome and give value to the ongoing relationships of interdependence, exchange, and collaboration that develop among the

protagonists of the school, who are engaged in integrating their knowledge and contextualizing it.

Another major choice was to create a dialogue of the political, administrative, and pedagogical domains, with the view that this reciprocity would provide the necessary consistency for realizing such a complex undertaking. As it happened, this choice turned out to be crucial at the cultural level, as school personnel developed a broader view that encompassed not only the children but also world events in general. It generated an awareness that the issues of children and childhood cannot be treated separately from the issues of women, men, families, and society.

Our engagement in and commitment to relationships progressively raised our attention to and awareness of the search for the "dimension of the possible" that characterizes the adventure of growing and of education. We feel that this attention to the process of "becoming" is highly fruitful in providing the positive conditions for realizing the educational project and also for continuing to learn; that is, for gradually acquiring the structures necessary for interpreting experience.

A no less important gain can be found with regard to the responsibilities vested in us as educators. In the conscious construction of a dialogue between ideas and practices that embodies the unpredictability and uncertainty of the real pulsing of life, we are constantly faced with the need to make choices, to rearrange elements of our own experience and that of others in sequences that generate innovations.

When all those involved are called upon to contribute to the construction of an educational project, and local discretion and adaptations are both permitted and supported, we can clearly see how the plurality and diversity of the points of view, expectations, and interpretations in a group can become resources for influencing "reality." This brings to light new and unexpected elements that help us constantly to reconsider the limitations and possibilities of the context in which we work. It is our actions that make the difference, and this implies our responsibility to be not so much the interpreters as the builders of the experience.

Declaring that meanings and knowledge are constructed, that they do not exist outside of ourselves, that children like adults are not spectators but actors of their own lives, leads to a conceptual, cultural, and epistemological overturning of the way we view education and the role of schools and teachers. Time and specific working conditions are required to make it possible for schools and

teachers to become real and effective sources of learning. In our ongoing and permanent staff development, we place a great deal of emphasis on promoting constant learning and an attitude of research, an openness to change and to discussing diverse points of view. Therefore, the organization of work must enable and support communicative dynamics which, by interweaving individual and collective thought, leads us to experiment with the existence of "possible worlds" and the possibility of constructing new meanings or, better, shared meanings.

We chose to have a working team in the school, where collaboration and collegiality are seen as quality features of the school's identity. The distribution of jobs, as well, is not only a functional choice but is devised so that every person, despite their different roles, can feel that they are included as an active part in the realization of the experience. These choices are both premises and conditions that foster the assumption of responsibility and continuous negotiation toward redefining one's own role and that of the school. Staff collegiality is not taken for granted; it must be supported by professional development initiatives and also requires that times and opportunities be established within the work schedule.

In Reggio, being able to reflect on our actions has been crucial to the development of our approach. Revisiting and reflecting on our actions, to which we give priority in our professional development and which are aided by the documentation process, enable us to take constant stock of and closely examine our experience and understandings. Reflective thinking allows us to step back from ourselves, creating a distance that prevents us from getting caught up in "events," thereby increasing our awareness of what we are learning and also of the dimension of the possible--of that which it is possible to know and to be. This phenomenon permeates the processes of adults and children alike.

The more this reflective process becomes a collegial endeavor (thanks to the organization of the work schedule so that we share our thoughts with our colleagues as well as with the children's families), the greater the possibility of more dialogic approaches that help us to appreciate the intentionality, the values, and the meanings present in the organization.

All this gives substance and meaning in our daily work to the idea that each act of perception is an act of creation that requires both the awareness of one's responsibility as a builder of possible worlds and the awareness that it is one of many points of view; that is, a sense of relativity emerges that strengthens one's desire to seek completeness in others. Right from the start, said Loris

Malaguzzi, children search for completeness, and they realize that this can be achieved not only through internal dialogue but also through dialogue with others. And the same is true for all of us.

The introduction of the atelier and the figure of the atelierista was another choice decisive for the identity of our experience. The benefits lie not only in the specific aspect of arts education, but in the creative process common to all the expressive languages, fostering the sort of "contamination" that gives rise to an original way of conceiving and developing an educational project. Moving from one language to another helps free us from the shackles of repetition, and we discover that we can always encounter new points of exploration and thus of departure.

In the awareness that we are dealing with an organism characterized by interactions that are rapid, complex, and simultaneous, we cannot think in terms of wanting to exercise overall control; we do, however, hold ourselves responsible for choosing and thus designing, to the best of our ability, the qualities of the bonds that we want to bring into existence.

The decision to have two coteachers in each classroom was not based on a goal of greater efficiency as much as on ethical, cultural, and pedagogical factors. The passage from one to two persons creates a basic nucleus of social behavior. A "pairing" of this sort brings into play interdependence and reciprocity of thought and action; and the choices made, which result from agreements, disagreements, and negotiations, become public acts. Moreover, this arrangement eliminates the isolation of the teacher in the classroom and fosters a first nucleus of socialization that, when multiplied by the number of classes and the number of staff, forms a team, or what we might call a breeding ground for human relationships.

To complete our discussion of organization as the *progettazione* of relationships, we should also mention aspects such as the environment, architecturally and functionally designed and equipped to provide a system of interactions and interconnection; the choice of small-group work as the most effective type of organization for fostering and giving quality to interactions and learning; the continuity of the class group; the time frames of the school day and year; and additional aspects that the reader will encounter in other chapters of the book.

In conclusion, we believe that the educational processes require thinking that can find interactions over broad and multiple dimensions. Therefore, it is

necessary to adopt an organizational method and style that are systemic, that enable us to grasp the unity of that which is normally kept separate. For this reason, our professional development projects have always aimed at supporting teachers' curiosity and fostering the pleasure of broadening the cultural context of our pedagogical approach. Within this ecological-systemic vision of the educational project, we attempt to make a close connection between educational issues and general inquiry on human relationships, on the relationship between man and knowledge, man and the world. Our aim is to build philosophical and value-related horizons that are closely interwoven with the emerging culture. Here the interdisciplinary approach is viewed not merely as a meeting of people who come from different disciplines, but as an exchange and collaboration between certain kinds of knowledge and understanding. It embodies and develops an organic, multidisciplinary approach whose nature is both cognitive and ethical. It is a way of living and thinking together that directly and deeply involves the cultural and didactic content.

