



## What is Your Image of the Child?

### Introduction

The social construction of the child has gained increasing attention in recent years: the idea that our image or understanding of the child is socially constructed within particular contexts and, further, that these constructions shape policies, provisions and practices. However, the attention paid to this idea has varied. It is important in some fields, for example the sociology of childhood, but rarely acknowledged in others, including policymaking. Social constructions are always present and influential, but in policymaking, they are usually implicit, and therefore not discussed.

One striking exception is the Italian city of Reggio Emilia, famous for its network of early childhood centres. Decades of pedagogical thought and practice have grown from asking the critical 'social constructionist' question: what is our image of the child? By using Reggio, the present brief does not intend to advocate their particular answer; it recognises that many images are possible. It aims to offer an example of the potential of making explicit the social construction of the child, and to discuss its implications and challenges for the development of policy and provision.

### The image of 'rich' child

Reggio's answer to their question was what Loris Malaguzzi, the first head of the city's early childhood centres, called the 'rich' child. But not 'rich' materially. Rather 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children'<sup>1</sup>. It is a contrast to some other common images of the child as lacking, passive, acted upon, or following a predetermined path set out by adults and/or innate 'development'<sup>2</sup>. The 'rich' child is an active learner, 'seeking the meaning of the world from birth, a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture and values'<sup>3</sup>; a citizen, the subject of rights not needs; and born with 'a hundred languages'. The theory of the hundred languages of childhood refers 'to the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems'. These many possibilities range from

mathematical and scientific languages to the many poetic or aesthetic languages expressed through, for example, the use of music, song, dance or photography<sup>4</sup>.

### Learning and values

Learning for the 'rich' child is understood to be 'a cooperative and communicative activity, in which children construct knowledge, make meaning of the world, together with adults and, equally important, other children'<sup>5</sup>. The destination of learning is open and uncertain, with a strong element of surprise and wonder. Learning has outcomes, but not all are predetermined and predictable. Values embraced by the image of the 'rich' child include uncertainty, diversity, subjectivity, dialogue, democracy, and experimentation. For example, taking democracy as one fundamental value, Reggio's practice is conceived as a 'participation-based project' where 'everyone – children, teachers and parents – is involved in sharing ideas, in discussion, in a sense of common purpose'<sup>6</sup>. Such practice understands that reality is subjective, knowledge is partial, and 'different readings of the world'<sup>7</sup> – and not only that of the educator – are possible. Guided by the value of experimentation, i.e. a desire to bring something new to life, Reggio's practice represents a way of living and relating that is open-ended (avoiding closure), open-minded (welcoming the unexpected) and open-hearted (valuing difference).

### Early childhood educator

The image of the 'rich child' requires a transformation in the role of the early childhood educator: from a technician applying prescribed methods to produce predefined outcomes, to a reflective, democratic and 'rich' professional. She or he needs to be attentive to 'creating possibilities rather than pursuing predefined goals', assuming 'responsibility to choose, experiment, discuss, reflect and change, focusing on the organisation of opportunities rather than the anxiety of pursuing outcomes, and maintaining in her work the pleasure of amazement and wonder'<sup>8</sup>. In Reggio, the 'rich'

<sup>1</sup> Malaguzzi, L. 1993. 'For an education based on relationships', *Young Children*, 11/93, 10.

<sup>2</sup> For fuller discussion, see Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., Pence, A. 2007; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care; Languages of Evaluation*. London: Routledge. Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Children in Europe. 2008. *Young Children and their Services: Developing a European Approach*. 6. Available at: [http://www.childrenineurope.org/docs/PolicyDocument\\_001.pdf](http://www.childrenineurope.org/docs/PolicyDocument_001.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Vecchi, V. forthcoming 2010. *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia*. London: Routledge. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, *ibid*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2004. Thoughts, theories and experiences: for an educational project with participation. In *Children in Europe*, 6, 28-30.

<sup>7</sup> Freire, P. 2004 edn. *Pedagogy of Hope*. London: Continuum. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Fortunati, A. 2006. *The Education of Young Children as a Community Project*. Azzano San Paolo: Edizioni junior. 34, 37.

educator is supported by, among others, *pedagogistas* and *atelieristas*. *Pedagogistas* are experienced educators each working with a small number of early childhood centres to help educators deepen their understanding of learning processes and pedagogical work. *Atelieristas* are educators with background in visual arts. They develop the role of visual languages – including just some of the hundred languages – in learning. They help connect the cognitive, expressive, rational and imaginative and bring an ‘aesthetic dimension’ to learning processes.

### **Pedagogical tools**

What pedagogical tools can be considered when working with the image of the ‘rich’ child and with what Reggio calls a ‘pedagogy of relationship and listening’, in which the ‘rich’ child learns through constantly creating, testing and re-creating theories, through processes of researching, experimenting, listening and dialoguing, always in relationship with other meaning-making subjects<sup>9</sup>. One of the pedagogical tools is ‘project work’. It refers to an in-depth investigation of a theme or question undertaken by a group of children, supported by their educators. Project work is about knowledge-building that involves creating, discussing, contesting and re-creating hypotheses. Neither the course of a project nor its outcomes are predefined; so the project is always open to modifications and changes of direction. This means ‘being sensitive to the unpredictable results of children’s investigation and research’<sup>10</sup>.

‘Pedagogical documentation’ is another pedagogical tool through which the image of the ‘rich’ child can be practised. Children’s learning processes are documented in various ways (e.g. notes, photos, video, children’s art work) and so made visible for dialogue, reflection and interpretation – always in relationship with others. It provides children and adults, educators and parents, with opportunities to research and understand learning. Used also in professional development, planning and evaluation, it is a useful and democratic tool for dialogue, exchange and sharing “everything with everyone”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Working with the ‘rich’ child poses some challenges in the development of early childhood policy and provision. First, it requires a well-trained early childhood workforce capable of supporting children’s learning to extend their understanding rather than teaching a received understanding. It is essential to provide support to the ongoing development and

enrichment of educators. Second, it requires careful attention to organisation, for example at least two educators per group of children, time made for practicing documentation, and roles such as *pedagogistas* and *atelieristas* to support and stimulate educators. Third, it challenges much of the dominant view of education, which is often reduced to transferring ‘important’ knowledge (e.g. literacy, math, science) from teacher to children, and which assumes that children are guided (in however ‘child-centred’ a way) towards a prescribed destination – early learning goals or similar normative and closed outcomes. The ‘rich’ child is a co-constructor of knowledge, learning best by being engaged and by doing, by experimenting and researching with others - not by being told. The potential of this ‘rich’ child ‘is stunted when the endpoint of their learning is formulated in advance’<sup>12</sup>. In an age when young children and their learning are increasingly tamed, controlled and evaluated by predetermined outcomes<sup>13</sup>, the image of the ‘rich’ child truly has profound implications for early childhood education.

*Peter Moss*

*Thomas Coram Research Unit  
Institute of Education, London*

\*\*\*\*\*

For other issues of the series, please click:  
<http://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood/unesco-policy-briefs-on-early-childhood/>  
For comments and inquiries, please contact:  
Division for the Promotion of Basic Education, UNESCO  
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 PARIS 07 SP, France  
☎ 33 1 45 68 08 86, fax: 33 1 45 68 56 26  
[earlychildhood@unesco.org](mailto:earlychildhood@unesco.org)

<sup>9</sup> Rinaldi, C. 2006 *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia*. London: Routledge. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Rinaldi, C. 2005. ‘Is a curriculum necessary?’, *Children in Europe*, 9, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Hoyuelos, A. 2004. ‘A pedagogy of transgression’, *Children in Europe*, 6, 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Rinaldi, C. 1993. ‘The emergent curriculum and social constructivism’, in C. Edwards, L.Gandini and G.Forman (eds.) *The Hundred Languages of Childhood*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Olsson, L.M. forthcoming, 2009. Movement and Experimentation in Young Children’s Learning: *Deleuze and Guattari in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge.