

# Re-imagining childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf <sup>[2]</sup>

## Excerpts

The child as citizen: the competent child, the child as possessor of rights

The key concept for us in Reggio Emilia is the concept of "child as citizen" right from birth. Not just the child as a private subject (the son or daughter of....) but as a citizen.

The emergence of this new subject of rights has incredible implications on the cultural, social and political levels of a society. Recognising the child as citizen makes it necessary to re-examine the very concept of citizenship, but especially to revisit the organisation of all the social and educational places of children's lives, not only early childhood centres and schools, but also hospitals, theatres, swimming pools, the town squares and streets, the architecture of our homes. We must re-conceptualise participation, and democracy itself. What is the relationship between rights and duties? A citizen, citizenship, and therefore a concept of democracy is defined and expressed beyond the traditional boundaries.

Moreover, when we define the child as 'a competent subject', we mean competent first of all in learning and therefore in living. When we talk about the child as 'a possessor of rights' we want to affirm something even more innovative.

With the first declaration, 'The competent child' we declare the competence of the child, of all children, to learn, and at the same time the inseparability of the right to life and the right to education, affirming education as a responsibility and duty of the society in which the child lives, and not just the family into which he or she is born.

With the second declaration, 'the child as possessor of rights', from birth, we make a declaration that is complex, certainly, but that is now more than ever topical: recognising the child's right to citizenship, so different, so 'foreign' and so far from the concept of the statutory citizen who goes to the polls to vote, places at the centre of attention the rights of all 'others'; the rights of women, of victims, of outcasts, of others who are 'foreigners' with respect to 'statutory citizenship'.

The child is an expression of the identity of humanity, of a human being who knows how to ask questions and ask himself questions, a child who is the first 'foreigner' among us. The child is a 'foreigner' in terms of being an 'outsider', outside the rules and the conventions. A foreigner is the one who, despite our predictions, is not predictable, and as such changes our schemas of expectation, the paradigms of reference (Malaguzzi's "challenging child").

A 'foreigner' who with her foreignness may be able, as Freud said, to reveal the 'foreigner in us' that is, the part of us that we do not want or know how to recognise in ourselves, the 'Other' who is in us. The child who brings the unexpected, the certain and the future that is inside of him.

This search for life and for the self is born with the child, and this is why we talk about the child who is competent and strong in this search toward life, toward others, toward the relations between self and life. A child, therefore, who is no longer considered to be fragile, suffering, incapable; a child who asks us to look at him or her with different eyes in order to empower their right to learn and to know, to find the meaning of life and of their own lives, alone and with others.

In Reggio Emilia, ours is a different idea and attitude toward the young child, who we see as active and who, along with us, searches every day to understand something, to draw out a meaning, to grasp a piece of life.

For adults and children alike, understanding means elaborating an interpretation, that which we call an 'interpretive theory', that is, a theory that gives meaning to the things and events of the world, a theory in the sense of a satisfactory explanation. We take the term 'theory' which usually has such serious connotations, and instead make it an everyday right, and we recognise this right in the child who we define as 'competent.'

Can a three or four-month-old child develop theories? I like to think so, because I feel that this conviction can lead to a different approach and, in particular, to these concepts of listening and relational creativity. A theory, therefore, is viewed as a satisfactory explanation, though also provisional. It is something more than simply an idea or a group of ideas. It must be pleasing and convincing, useful and capable

of satisfying our intellectual, affective and also aesthetic needs. That is, it must give us the sense of a wholeness that generates a sense of beauty and satisfaction.

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