

Rethinking our Image of a Child Kim Atkinson

What is your image of a child? A rather a provocative question, and certainly not one parents give much thought to. Children are cute, funny, have a lot of energy, and need your attention all the time. They need to be fed, clothed, they ask a lot of questions, they certainly create a lot of laundry and can mess up a house in a minute and a half. But what is your image of a child?

This is a question that is being asked by educators of young children around the world, and the consequences of the answer are startlingly important.

How we view children depends on our place in time and our culture. Children have been variously viewed as a source of labour, as the wide-eyed innocent, as creatures to manage or control, or as beings that need to be trained properly to be the 'right' kind of adult. As adults we define what children "need" and then proceed to transmit "knowledge" by the means we deem best. Our educational systems are a testament to this view as standardized testing, mandated curriculum, and a day divided into scheduled bits of time are the norm.

But what if we create a different image of a child? What if we think of children as competent? What if we look at what a child *can* do, at what they can express? What if we have been vastly underestimating and cutsifying what children are capable of? What if we see children as continually forming theories, and then testing them?

What theories? What testing? Ok, stay with me, and think of a three year old with a puzzle. She has all the pieces out and she's working on putting them back. in place. She's taking a long time and really, I would like to just barge in show her how to do it. But, being a good teacher/parent I sit and watch. And if I watch closely, if I look at her face, her hands, her body, I see she is testing out all kinds of ideas, trying everything out. She is testing out theories that I, in my adult mind, have forgotten. She turns a piece, adjusts, tries twice. She is testing all the laws of geometry, spatial relationships, she is using visual cues of shape and colour, testing the relationship of the wooden pieces against the wooden board, testing and re-testing theories of what might work. And the really amazing thing is, she finishes the puzzle, looks at it with satisfaction, then dumps it out to test those theories again.

Children learn through doing, reflecting, advancing and pausing. They construct theories, make connections and transfer understanding from one experience to another. They are natural researchers.

If we embrace this image of the child, what are the consequences, and why is that so startlingly important? Simply put, if we recognize children as competent, complex learners, we have to re think our role as educators.

There is a small town in Italy called Reggio Emilia where, in the 1940's, parents began to ask themselves questions about educating children. Questions like, what does society hope for children? What is the role of the school? For whom? What are our values? What is the meaning of 'to educate'? From these questions has arisen a philosophy and schools that embrace relationships, organize time in large blocks to explore deeply, that invite the child, the teachers and the parents to be collaborators. The prime methodology for teachers is listening to all that children say through their bodies, their art, their movement, their eyes, their hands, their silences. Rather than giving children answers, teachers expand the questions.

For me personally, discovering this approach to early learning was like discovering a map. I'd been trying out pathways, and had made some progress on my own. But here was a framework, directions that led to where I knew I should be going. And I'm not alone. Recently I was at a conference where 400 educators came together to explore, discuss and learn more about the Reggio approach, and the air was thick with our collective Aha!! I talked with a woman from Ontario who told me she cried when she read about this philosophy.

Reggio Emilia in Italy is not the only place that has created a new vision of early learning and care, there are examples all over the world of agencies creating new frameworks for care and education of young children. In our province there are schools, preschools and child care providers who embrace this vision, but there are many who don't. As our province proposes all day kindergarten for three, four and five year olds we might want to ask ourselves those questions raised in Italy 65 years ago, 'What do we want for our children?' What are our values? What is our image of a child?

Carilna Rinaldi, educator, thinker, pioneer and Reggio teacher writes "Reflect on.....a school that cares not just about learning to read, write, add and use the computer correctly, but more than anything wants to open itself to life, to generate life because it is capable of generating curiosity, pleasure in research, and new constructs in friendship and solidarity,"

And Jerome Bruner wrote, "School is not a preparation for life, but is life itself".

What kind of life do we want in our schools?