

The pedagogy of listening

In dialogue with Reggio Emilia : Listening, researching and learning. (Rinaldi, C. 2005, p.49-51).

How can we define the term listening?

Listening as sensitivity to the patterns that connect, to that which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.

Listening, then, as a metaphor for having the openness and sensitivity to listen and be listened to—listening not just with our ears, but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation).

Listening to the hundred, the thousand languages, symbols and codes we use to express ourselves and communicate, and with which life expresses itself and communicates to those who know how to listen. Listening as time, the time of listening, a time that is outside chronological time—a time full of silences, of long pauses, an interior time. Interior listening, listening to ourselves, as a pause, a suspension, as an element that generates listening to others but, in turn, is generated by the listening that others give us.

Behind the act of **listening** there is often a curiosity, a desire, a doubt, an interest; there is always an emotion. Listening is emotion; it is generated by emotions and stimulates emotions. The emotions of others influence us by means of processes that are strong, direct, not mediated, and intrinsic to the interactions between communicating subjects. Listening as welcoming and being open to differences, recognising the value of the other's point of view and interpretation.

Listening as an active verb that involves interpretation, giving meaning to the message and value to those who offer it. Listening that does not produce answers but formulates questions; listening that is generated by doubt, by uncertainty, which is not insecurity but, on the contrary, the security that every truth is such only if we are aware of its limits and its possible 'falsification'.

Listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and at the same time a suspension of our judgments and above all our prejudices; it requires openness to change. It demands that we have clearly in mind the value of the unknown and that we are able to overcome the sense of emptiness and precariousness that we experience whenever our certainties are questioned.

Listening that takes the individual out of anonymity, that legitimates us, gives us visibility, enriching both those who listen and those who produce the message (and children cannot bear to be anonymous).

Listening as the premise for any learning relationship—learning that is determined by the 'learning subject' and takes shape in his or her mind through action and reflection, that

becomes knowledge and skill through representation and exchange. Listening, therefore, as 'a listening context', where one learns to listen and narrate, where individuals feel legitimated to represent their theories and offer their own interpretations of a particular question. In representing our theories, we 're-know' or 're-cognise' them, making it possible for our images and intuitions to take shape and evolve through action, emotion, expressiveness, and iconic and symbolic representations (the 'hundred languages'). Understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue.

We represent the world in our minds, and this representation is the fruit of our sensitivity to the way in which the world is interpreted in the minds and in the representations of others. It is here that our sensitivity to listening is highlighted; starting from this sensitivity, we form and communicate our representations of the world based not only on our response to events (self-construction), but also on that which we learn about the world from our communicative exchange with others.

The ability to shift (from one kind of intelligence to another, from one language to another) is not only a potential within the mind of each individual but also involves the tendency to shift across (to interact among) many minds. We enrich our knowledge and our subjectivity thanks to this predisposition to welcoming the representations and theories of others—that is, listening to others and being open to them.

This capacity for listening and reciprocal expectations, which enables communication and dialogue, is a quality of the mind and of the intelligence, particularly in the young child. It is a quality that demands to be understood and supported. In the metaphorical sense, in fact, children are the greatest listeners of all to the reality that surrounds them. They possess the time of listening, which is not only time for listening but a time that is rarefied, curious, suspended, generous—time full of waiting and expectation. Children listen to life in all its shapes and colours, and they listen to others (adults and peers). They quickly perceive how the act of listening (observing, but also touching, smelling, tasting, searching) is essential for communication. Children are biologically predisposed to communicate, to exist in relation, to live in relation.

Listening, then, seems to be an innate predisposition that accompanies children from birth, allowing their process of acculturation to develop. The idea of an innate capacity for listening may seem paradoxical but, in effect, the process of acculturation must involve innate motivations and competencies. The newborn child comes into the world with a self that is joyous, expressive, and ready to experiment and explore, using objects and communicating with other people. Right from the beginning, children show a remarkable exuberance, creativity and inventiveness toward their surroundings, as well as an autonomous and coherent consciousness.

Very early in life, children demonstrate that they have a voice, but above all that they know how to listen and want to be listened to. Sociality is not taught to children: they are social beings. Our task is to support them and live their sociality with them; that is the social quality

that our culture has produced. Young children are strongly attracted by the ways, the languages (and thus the codes) that our culture has produced, as well as by other people (children and adults).

It is a difficult path that requires efforts, energies, hard work and sometimes suffering, but it also offers wonder, amazement, joy, enthusiasm and passion. It is a path that takes time, time that children have and adults often do not have or do not want to have. This is what a school should be: first and foremost, a context of multiple listening. This context of multiple listening, involving the teachers but also the group of children and each child, all of whom can listen to others and listen to themselves, overturns the teaching—learning relationship. This overturning shifts the focus to learning; that is, to children's self-learning and the learning achieved by the group of children and adults together.

As children represent their mental images to others, they represent them to themselves, developing a more conscious vision (interior listening). Thus, moving from one language to another, from one field of experience to another, and reflecting on these shifts and those of others, children modify and enrich their theories and conceptual maps. But this is true if, and only if, children have the opportunity to make these shifts in a group context—that is, in and with others—and if they have the possibility to listen and be listened to, to express their differences and be receptive to the differences of others. The task of those who educate is not only to allow the differences to be expressed but to make it possible for them to be negotiated and nurtured through exchange and comparison of ideas. We are talking about differences between individuals but also differences between languages (verbal, graphic, plastic, musical, gestural, etc.), because it is the shifting from one language to another, as well as their reciprocal interaction, that enables the creation and consolidation of concepts and conceptual maps.

Not only does the individual child learn how to learn, but the group becomes conscious of itself as a 'teaching place', where the many languages are enriched, multiplied, refined and generated, but also collide, 'contaminate' and hybridise each other and are renewed.

The concept of 'scaffolding', which has characterised the role of the teacher, also assumes new and different methods and meanings. It is the context, the web of reciprocal expectations (more than the teachers themselves) that sustains the individual and group processes. In addition to offering support and cultural mediation (subject matter, instruments, etc.), teachers who know how to observe, document and interpret the processes that the children undergo autonomously will realise in this context their greatest potential to learn how to teach.

Documentation, therefore, is seen as visible listening, as the construction of traces (through notes, slides, videos, and so on) that not only testify to the children's learning paths and processes, but also make them possible because they are visible. For us this means making visible, and thus possible, the relationships that are the building blocks of knowledge.