



# A way of transformation. Research and training with theater in pre-school education

## Un camino de transformación. Investigación y formación con el teatro en la educación infantil

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### ABSTRACT

Involving children in theatre at school means ritualizing and progressively enhancing the educational valence of a language and a natural inclination that are typical of both children and educational settings.

In this paper, we present the outcomes of an action research project involving childhood education services, educators, teachers, children and their families, which allowed us to experience the implicitly theatrical dimension of school life and more consciously help it to emerge. The aim of this training and research programme was to systematise diverse projects – all centred around theatre, theatricality and its various forms – that were already ongoing in early childhood education centres and preschools.

Through this programme, we set out to train teachers and educators in recognizing and harnessing the educational potential inherent in theatre, both in the course of their everyday educational practice and in designing and implementing cycles of workshops based on the languages and techniques of theatre. Two specific research hypotheses were formulated by the research team. The first hypothesis was that theatre is already part of daily educational action with pre-schoolers, because it is present in the domains of narrative, symbolic play, expressive and bodily play, self-discovery and self-expression in the group context. Hence, we set out through our research to identify the existing relationship between theatre and

everyday educational practice, between the visible and invisible theatres that are already present in our schools; we also wished to identify the urgent areas of need in which theatre can act as a vehicle and driver of educational change. The second hypothesis concerned the transformative function that theatre can fulfil in (pre)school settings: the research aim here was to identify the conditions under which theatre can bring about change in any educational context, by facilitating cognitive decentring, enhancing subjects' awareness of their "role" and their relationships with others, allowing them to "theatrically render" their relationships and mutual positioning, and leading them to discover new languages and expressive techniques.

Key words: Theatre, Pre-school Education, Action Research, Teacher Training

### RIASSUNTO

Fare teatro a scuola con i bambini significa questo: ritualizzare e rendere sempre più educativo un linguaggio e una disposizione naturale dell'infanzia e dei contesti educativi.

Quello che segue è l'esito di una ricerca-azione che ha coinvolto servizi per l'infanzia, educatori, insegnanti, bambini e le loro famiglie, durante il quale abbiamo sperimentato quanto ci fosse di implicitamente teatrale nella vita scolastica per farlo emergere con più consapevolezza. Quello qui presentato è l'esito di un percorso di formazione e ricerca volto a sistematizzare le molteplici ed eterogenee esperienze già in atto in diversi servizi e scuole per l'infanzia di una metropoli del Nord Italia in merito al teatro

e alle varie forme di teatralità. Nell'ambito del progetto di ricerca-formazione "Milano - Infanzia e Linguaggi Teatrali", uno degli intenti primari è stato quello di formare insegnanti ed educatori capaci di cogliere e utilizzare il potenziale educativo insito nel teatro sia all'interno della normale prassi educativa e scolastica sia nella progettazione e realizzazione di percorsi laboratoriali in grado di riferirsi ai linguaggi e alle tecniche dell'arte teatrale.

Nello specifico le ipotesi di ricerca da cui il gruppo è partito e su cui si è costantemente confrontato e interrogato. La prima riguarda la convinzione che il teatro sia già presente nell'agire educativo quotidiano con i bambini della prima infanzia, poiché è presente negli ambiti di narrazione, di gioco simbolico, di gioco espressivo e corporeo, di scoperta e espressione di sé in gruppo. La ricerca è stata così rivolta all'individuazione del rapporto esistente tra teatro e pratiche scolastiche quotidiane, tra teatri visibili e teatri invisibili già presenti e disseminati nella scuola e all'individuazione di quelle zone di emergenza dove il teatro può essere portatore e motore di cambiamento e trasformazioni educativamente rilevanti. La seconda riguarda la funzione trasformativa che il teatro può avere nella scuola: in questo senso la ricerca è stata indirizzata all'individuazione delle condizioni grazie alle quali il teatro può produrre cambiamento in ogni contesto educativo, attraverso la dislocazione cognitiva che offre, attraverso la possibilità di aumentare la consapevolezza del proprio "ruolo" e della relazione con gli altri e attraverso la "messa in scena" delle relazioni e delle reciproche posizioni, grazie alla scoperta di nuovi linguaggi e tecniche espressivi.

Key words: Teatro, Educazione dell'infanzia, Ricerca Azione, Formazione degli Insegnanti

#### RESUMEN

Hacer teatro en la escuela con los niños quiere decir transformar, en más educativo, un lenguaje y una disposición natural de la infancia y del contexto educativo.

En este artículo presentamos el resultado de un proyecto de investigación-acción que incluyó a escuelas infantiles, educadores, maestros, niños y niñas y a sus familias, y en la cual hemos podido experimentar la dimensión teatral implícita en la vida escolar, así como ayudar a hacerla emerger de forma más consciente. El objetivo de este programa de formación e investigación fue sistematizar diferentes proyectos- todos ellos centrados en el teatro, la teatralidad y sus diferentes formas- que ya estaban en marcha en los centros de educación infantil. A través de este programa se pretende capacitar a maestros y educadores en el reconocimiento y aprovechamiento del potencial educativo inherente al teatro, tanto en su práctica educativa cotidiana como en el diseño e implementación de ciclos de talleres

basados en los lenguajes y técnicas del teatro. Las hipótesis de investigación desde las partió el grupo, y sobre las que trabajó, fueron dos: la primera hipótesis es que el teatro ya forma parte de la acción educativa cotidiana en educación infantil, ya que está presente en el ámbito de la narrativa, del juego simbólico, del juego expresivo y corporal, de búsqueda y expresión de sí mismo en grupo; también quisimos identificar las áreas de urgentes de necesidad en las que el teatro puede actuar como vehículo y motor del cambio educativo.

La segunda hipótesis tiene que ver con la función de transformación que el teatro puede tener en la escuela infantil: en este sentido la investigación apunta a individuar las condiciones gracias a las cuales el teatro puede producir un cambio en cada contexto educativo a través del desplazamiento cognitivo que ofrece, mediante la posibilidad de aumentar la conciencia del propio "rol" y de la relación con los otros, y a través de la "puesta en escena" de las relaciones y de las posiciones recíprocas, llevándoles a descubrir nuevos lenguajes y técnicas expresivas.

Palabras clave: Teatro, Educación Infantil, Investigación-Acción, Formación de Maestros

## INTRODUCTION: WHY THEATRE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD?

Theatre is one of the great expressions of human creativity. Originating in the special area of experience that unites the sacred, celebration, play and ritual, it joins the expressive use of the body with that of the voice to endow spectacle and performance with meaning and emotion. Theatre is a vehicle for culture, both in terms of passing on tradition and in terms of violating codes and acting as an agent of social and political change. It is a place of encounter, expression of avant-gardes, and artistic language. It is, first and foremost, imitation, but in the most noble sense of the term, that of a vital force making human thoughts and behaviours alive and present, making them redundant, repeating them to make them meaningful and real, with their own expressivity and personal uniqueness. Theatre is humankind representing itself and this is exactly what children do every day.

Children naturally engage in theatre, although we might more simply describe this as play, because they perform, light-heartedly and yet with great seriousness, the part of the human being who is in the world but free of commitments, obligations, goals, or duties. Children engage in theatre when they stage continual transformations and repetitions, symbo-

lized gestures, sudden movements, relations and dynamics, all of which represent the most authentic dimension of humanness: our relations with people and things, enacted in our eating, working, loving, providing care, etc.

Involving children in theatre at school means this: ritualizing and progressively enhancing the educational valence of a language and a natural inclination that are typical of both children and educational settings. Transforming contexts, situations and relationships for play, rehearsing, staging them and taking them apart to put them back together again. In this paper, we present the outcomes of an action research project involving childhood education services, educators, teachers, children and their families, which allowed us to experience the implicitly theatrical dimension of school life and more consciously help it to emerge.

The aim of this training and research programme was to systematise diverse projects – all centred around theatre, theatricality and its various forms – that were already ongoing in early childhood education centres and preschools in a North Italian city. Through this programme, entitled “Milano – Early Childhood and Theatrical Languages”, we set out to train teachers and educators in recognizing and harnessing the educational potential inherent in theatre, both in the course of their everyday educational practice and in designing and implementing cycles of workshops based on the languages and techniques of theatre.

The abilities that the research team set out to explore and, simultaneously, to foster, by means of a series of theatre-related actions and activations, were not the professional abilities of the actor or director, but complex educational competencies enabling participants to enrich their educational work by drawing on the domain of “theatricality”, in other words by theatrically representing and mindfully managing the emotional, relational and cognitive dimensions implicated in all teaching/learning processes.

## THE ACTORS

The action-research project “Milano Infanzia e Linguaggi Teatrali” was designed and implemented as part of a collaboration agreement between the University of Milano-Bicocca and the Catholic University of Milan, and funded by Milan City Council. The other project partners were local childhood education services and actor-trainers from Teatro del Buratto, Alma Rosè and the cooperative La Fucina.

The two universities have a long and rich history of engagement with both theatre and training-research based on learning by doing for early childhood educators (Antonacci, Guerra, Mancino, 2015; Antonacci, Cappa, 2001, 2009; Guerra, 2011; Guerra, Militello, 2011).

The research team comprised education specialists from the University of Milano Bicocca, social theatre scholars from the Catholic University and theatre professionals from the three external partner organizations. The university team members viewed the project as a means of reinforcing and enhancing the participating childhood educational services, namely: Giustizia Preschool, Pallanza Preschool, Ragusa Preschool (Zone 2); Sulmona Preschool, Monte Velino Preschool, Martini ECEC, including “bridge year” classes, Martinengo Preschool (Zone 4); Del Volga Preschool, Merloni Preschool, Senigallia ECEC (Zone 9). The project ran for 18 months from the second semester of the 2012-2013 school year to the end of the 2013-2014 school year.

## THE QUESTIONS

Our initial research hypotheses were based on the following questions: What relationship is there, and what relationship might there be, between theatre and daily practice, between the visible and invisible theatres that are embedded in the educational behaviour of toddlers and pre-schoolers. When can theatre generate change in educational settings?

Two specific research hypotheses were formulated by the research team and constantly revisited and debated in the course of monthly team meetings held throughout the running of the project. The first hypothesis was that theatre is already part of daily educational action with pre-schoolers, because it is present in the domains of narrative, symbolic play, expressive and bodily play, self-discovery and self-expression in the group context. Hence, we set out through our research to identify the existing relationship between theatre and everyday educational practice, between the visible and invisible theatres that are already present in our schools; we also wished to identify the urgent areas of need in which theatre can act as a vehicle and driver of educational change.

The second hypothesis concerned the transformative function that theatre can fulfil in (pre)school settings: the research aim here was to identify the conditions under which theatre can bring about change in any educational context, by facilitating cognitive de-centring, enhancing subjects’ awareness of their “role”

and their relationships with others, allowing them to “theatrically render” their relationships and mutual positioning, and leading them to discover new languages and expressive techniques.

The research team assigned key priority status to observing, drawing out and pointing up the “theatricality” already present in daily educational practice in schools. A shared glossary was jointly constructed ad hoc for the project, with a view to facilitating the task of defining theatre and theatricality in preschool and early childhood education centres.

## THE ACTIONS

**I**n the first phase of the project, a work group of trainers, theatre specialists and teachers/educators was formed with the brief of defining the concept of theatre, and especially of identifying meanings of theatre that increased its relevance to their own educational work in the field.

Next, through theatre activations conducted in the participating schools, we sought to provide instruments for using the dimension of theatre to bring about possible change in educational settings. Specifically, the inherent potential of theatrical language, understood as an alternative model based on the creation of significant relationships, was harnessed to explore a range of functions and roles, from that of the playwright to those of director, actor and spectator.

These actions and activations were part of a broader training-research programme aimed at drawing out and reactivating teachers’ and educators’ pre-existing and frequently unconscious competencies, as well as stimulating and encouraging them to develop new ones.

Each individual action was jointly designed by a trainer and an expert in the languages of theatre. While the trainer took overall responsibility for the opening and closing phases of the project – introducing and defining the initial aims; debriefing participants on the outcomes vis-à-vis the stated aims; documenting the entire process and supervising the wind-up phase – the theatre professional was in charge of conducting activations that were appropriate to achieving the project aims, and in relation to the final re-elaboration of the outcomes, helped the group to continue bringing a theatrical perspective and theatrical language to bear on the project and its aims.

The actions were of two main kinds. First, we set out to provide in-depth training in the languages of theatre and their educational value for early childho-

od educators and preschool teachers.

Second, we offered children the opportunity to experience theatre and thereby to encounter less familiar cultural dimensions, especially in relation to the areas of particular need identified in the early stages of the project.

All this took place within a broader plan to design and implement spaces of sharing for a core extended community formed by the children’s families and local communities and of which educational services are a part.

We now describe the individual actions in more detail.

### ACTION 1: TRAINING LABORATORIES FOR ADULTS

The first phase of the project consisted of theoretical, experiential and brainstorming sessions conducted with the educators and teachers of one education unit (U.E.) per zone, specifically up to a maximum of 25 educators per group, in order to provide basic knowledge of the meanings of theatre, theatrical technique and theatrical languages. The three sessions held with the staff of each education unit, helped to lay the ground for the subsequent implementation of a project that was co-designed by education specialists, theatre specialists and educators, with a view to attracting the mindful engagement of children and other significant adults. During this phase, in which the early childhood services were constantly consulted, both theatre training and discussion/reflection activities were offered. Key themes and issues were identified and these subsequently informed the design of the theatre laboratories to be offered to the children involved in the project by the school (mixed age or same age groups).

### ACTION 2 THEATRE LABORATORY ACTIVITIES WITH AND FOR CHILDREN

The second phase of the project involved the implementation of laboratories for children. These were co-conducted by a theatre expert and the children’s own educators. The laboratories took place over six two-hour sessions and comprised preparation, performance and debriefing stages. Two classes per education unit were given the opportunity to take part in this phase: an infant-toddler group or bridging class, and a class of preschoolers. In parallel, a further cycle of four supervision sessions were conducted with the assistance of the theatre expert for groups of 25 educators and teachers from the various education units.



### **ACTION 3 ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF OPEN EVENTS TARGETING CHILDREN'S FAMILIES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

In parallel with Action 1, activities were carried out with a view to preparing and implementing an end-of-year event (during the first six months of the research, corresponding to the second half of the 2012-2013 school year), designed to offer a first taste of theatre to the users of the education services or preschools participating in the project and their communities.

In parallel with the second phase (in the second year of the research, 2013-2014 school year), actions targeting other significant adults were also offered, especially the families of the education units involved in the projects, but also the non-teaching staff at the participating preschools and infant-toddler centres. These groups were invited to help out with the planning and implementing of open "lessons", feste teatrali, scenic games, or with the laying out of school spaces to create a routes to discovery etc.. The events were planned in conjunction with the participating educators and teachers and were designed on the one hand to encourage maximum involvement on the part of adult family members, not only in terms of the final outputs of the activities, but also in terms of the sharing of meanings and methods, and on the other hand to open up new spaces of relation among all the significant adults.

Similarly, a theatre laboratory for parents was run from the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, in parallel with the children's laboratory, again involving six two-hour sessions, and conducted by a theatre expert with the supervision and occasional participation of the trainer. There was constant dialogue between this cycle of laboratories and that being conducted with the educators, especially toward the end of the course. The sessions with adults were usually conducted by a trainer and a theatre expert, while those with children were run by the expert under the trainer's supervision.

### **ACTION 4 DISSEMINATION OF THE RESULTS**

Finally, in order to make public the research outcomes, two open seminars targeted at schools and interested sectors of the broader community were held. At the first seminar in the Catholic University of Milan in October 2013, the research team announced their preliminary findings and collected the insights and reflections of all project participants in the course

of presentation, discussion and expressive activation sessions. The second seminar, held at the University of Milano Bicocca in June 2014, communicated the project outcomes via experiential laboratories, followed by a comprehensive presentation of all the documentation produced during the project (analysis of journals, observation grids and notes, blogs and video footage) and wound up with a joint celebration involving all the project stakeholders: the two universities, the schools, the families and members of the community.

## **THE METHODOLOGIES**

The methods adopted in the project were mainly participatory (Tarozzi, 2001), more specifically from the action-research tradition (Lewin, 1947), chosen because it leads researchers to interact with the object of their research and therefore to be directly involved. As in participatory research (Nigris, 1998), both researchers and participants are implicated in the process under investigation: the participants contribute to the interpretative process, and are recognised to bear the specific knowledge of those who are inside a given experience. Hence, meaning is co-produced by researchers together with participants. (Barbier, 2007)

The various project activities were designed to promote synergies among the different competencies and specializations of the team members from the two universities. Expertise in education (Antonacci, 2001, 2012; Guerra, 2013; Antonacci, Guerra, Mancino, 2015) as well as the overall supervision of the educational, teaching and training dimensions of the project (the setting, the group, the educational relationship) benefited from the encounter and integration of different perspectives. The language of theatre (Bernardi, 2015; Colombo, 2015) facilitated exploration of the social and relational dimensions, with a particular focus on the needs of the broader community (related to multiculturalism and socioeconomic disadvantage).

The use of artistic-expressive languages and techniques was introduced by the theatre experts.

The mix of methodological perspectives drawn on also offered multiple and diverse tools for documentation, which were later systematized by the researchers. These tools facilitated the emergence of criteria for the identification of new educational theatre models, as well as the production of sociological documentation on the impact of the project on the participating schools, their subjects, and the link between schools and the broader community.

The educational work took the form of training research, a mode of research that encourages reflective practices within an organization, generating shared knowledge (Formenti & Gamelli, 1998; Mantovani, 1998; Nigris, 1998). This was intended to promote the acquisition of new competences by the participants, but also to bring about profound change in approaches to and the future implementation of theatre projects in these early childhood education settings. First, participants were guided to recognize, define and order their ongoing training experience, producing a map of the ongoing theatre laboratories that reflected both the characteristics of the local area and of the trainees themselves. The documentation materials and the experience acquired by the participants and the services provided the starting point for identifying and defining methodological criteria and – as the outcome of further reflection – their educational functions and power to orient future practice. To this end, participants shared and experimented with tools for documenting and monitoring the project outcomes, as well as helping to make them more visible and communicate them: a blog, video footage, observation grids, interviews, observation notebooks.

## THE INSTRUMENTS

The chosen instruments contribute in different ways to making the documentation exercise a form of educational research and a participatory strategy. As well as the structured observation grids and journals kept by trainers following an observation protocol structured around core themes, participants were recommended to keep observation “notebooks”. The notebooks, given to each of the participating educators at the beginning of the second year, were mainly intended to be used as open-ended reflective journals, in which to record the questions arising in the course of the laboratory activities.

Again, in order to facilitate structure and focus in participants’ reflections, key themes around which to organize their accounts of their experiences were provided.

The first theme was designed to focus their attention on the children as a “group” and was formulated as a question: What do you observe about group relations during the theatre laboratory?

The second was designed to draw attention to changes displayed by the children during the laboratory work: What do you notice about individual children during the laboratory? What aspects do you obser-

ve in individual children from one session to another that you feel may be linked to the work carried out in the laboratory?

The third theme elicited a focus on the adult participants’ own use of theatrical competencies: With respect to what you see done in the laboratories, what do you already know how to do and what do you already do? What new things are you learning that you would like to do? What do you think is impossible to do or of no value?

At the end of the project, the team produced two final reports containing the full description and analysis of the outcomes. The educational documentation was produced by the University of Milano Bicocca team and the sociological documentation by the team from the Catholic University of Milan.

In autumn 2013, the education team set up a blog called AlTea at the address <http://infanziaelinguaggi-teatrati.blogspot.it/>, in order to disseminate as widely as possible and share among the three participating education units the materials issuing from the ongoing research and training activities.

The blog also fitted well among the tools selected to attain some of the project aims such as stimulating group interaction at the community and broader society level, and stimulating new forms of social interaction; sustaining the network of subjects involved in early childhood education; fostering relations between schools and the community; promoting the large-scale communication of the learning from the project by starting from the local community and then fanning out.

The blog was chosen as an effective, simple and adaptable tool for disseminating, in parallel with the project activities, emergent outcomes, ideas and proposals, images, exchanges of views among trainers, teachers, parents, children, etc. It is an instrument that all subjects may easily access in order to verify current project status, comment on posts, read newly posted documents, download materials, exchange materials and reports, etc.

The blog was moderated by an expert who monitored contents and comments and authorized their publication.

The concept of leaving the reading, writing, posting and commenting to the various subjects participating in the project, with the researchers limiting themselves to administering and moderating the blog, encouraged active participation on the part of the various experts, trainers, teachers, parents and children. It also facilitated communication among the three edu-

cation units, among teachers in the same unit and even among participating teachers and teachers elsewhere in the city and beyond – enabling them to exchange ideas, advice and tools on the theme of theatre in early childhood education.

The educational team also used video-narrative as a tool for documenting the research process.

This was operationalized by video recording representative episodes of project activity, and then assembling and editing the footage into a single documentary expressing the variety and richness of the project work, spanning the training, relating to others, interaction, planning and debriefing stages.

Conceived as a means of sharing and disseminating an account of the project, the video was produced in such a way as to equitably reflect the roles played by the different categories of actor, but more specially to allow the video's end users to experience the project's atmosphere and get a feel for its different dimensions.

The video also offered the advantage of being a versatile product that communicates at different levels, and may be accompanied by written documentation providing a more in-depth and rounded out account.

The video can also act as a "teaser" when communicating the project, that is, as a stimulus introducing the provision of further examples, witness accounts etc. When fleshed out by photographic and written documents, the video truly offers insights into the methods applied in the project and dynamics that arose during implementation which would be extremely difficult to account for by other means. The continuous exchange promoted and implemented through the video helps to illustrate the purpose of documentation, which is to create an action network – as the video itself already portrays and provides an account of by giving voice to a plurality of settings and actors, shown to be making use of multiple instruments and methods.

The variety of tools used was intended to reflect the complexity of the languages that came into play as the project was implemented in the field. It not only ensured an adequate level of documentation of the project work, but became research material in its own right, facilitating further analysis of the many questions that arise when theatre is introduced into early childhood education and preschools.

## CONCLUSIONS

**T**he complexity of the research design, the multiple perspectives and instruments brought to bear on the

project work and the different categories of subject involved, gave rise to a large body of observations and reflections around the original research questions. We now summarize some of this output in relation to the three main groups targeted in this project, namely teachers and educators, children and families.

The work conducted with educators and teachers, which as we have seen comprised theoretical, experiential and reflective components, enabled exploration of the possible connections between theatre and educational work in early childhood education services.

Having personally experienced theatre activations enabled teachers and parents to develop a new perspective on educational action: the feedback collected suggests that these groups of adults came to see theatre as engagement, a chance to boost imagination and creativity, and to integrate the dimensions of the body and the emotions. Thus, theatre offers above all the opportunity to get to know one's own limits, alongside the pleasure of rediscovering oneself.

The activations offered to participants brought to light an extremely close link between theatrical and educational competence. Theatre was experienced in a unique way in each of participating education units, and this helped to shed light on educational experience by making participants more aware of, and more competent in relation to, bodily and emotional dimensions.

Given that laboratories' main purpose was to enhance participants' theatrical awareness as the basis for establishing a common language, they strongly emphasized the expressive, emotional and relational dimensions, favouring the creative components of thought, and consequently enhancing flexibility and openness to change in the educational setting.

The exercises proposed during the laboratories were primarily designed to aid reflexivity and particularly the rediscovery of theatricality as a pre-expressive characteristic of the human being. Hence the elements of the warm-up, knowledge, space, movement, the group, the voice and celebration are also inherent in all educational experience. Space, movement, the body and the voice as self-exploration, and as research techniques, strategies and methods for use with children. The celebration was interpreted as the closing rite, as make-believe, in the sense of deliberately created, as a moment in which the school community became visible and met, but also an opportunity to present and discover familiar places revisited and transformed by a new light.

The laboratory in particular, jointly run by a theatre specialist and a trainer, gave rise to a particular form of reflexivity based on shared learning by doing, which was stimulated by the various exercises proposed: the participants came to view theatre as a complete and transversal experience providing the instruments required to undertake a personal journey in search of one's own expressive potential.

The work carried out with the children, via laboratories co-conducted by a theatre specialist and the children's own educators, who were concurrently themselves receiving expert supervision, gave participants the opportunity to discuss the possible impacts of theatre and its languages on the personal and cultural development of young children.

The dimension of theatre that this project set out to promote was not Theatre with a capital T, understood as a full-fledged spectacle, a mere exhibition of skill. Rather, the dimension investigated and fostered here was that of a theatre and its languages that are thought of as possibility, as openness to multiple pathways and meanings, a game for getting to know oneself better, for developing one's powers of concentration, enhancing one's attention span and relational skills, as well as one's respect for the time and space of others, while cultivating an increasingly original richness of expression. Thus, theatre is seen as an opportunity to encounter one's own and others' creative liberty, offering children in particular the chance to enter spaces and timeframes in which they can enjoy the freedom to dream. In this project, the children, even very young children attending infant-toddler centres, entered the worlds and games proposed by the theatre specialists with an ease that amazed their educators.

The activities conducted with the children thus generated a rich exchange of ideas and acted as an ongoing stimulus, fostering multiple and ever changing perspectives on the children and on the here and now of educational events.

The theatre laboratory for children generated change at multiple levels. The first was the level of meanings: theatre and education not only provided rich insights into the theme of transformation, but mutually enriched one another's meanings and perceived possibilities, given that that they may be seen as a metaphor for one another. Theatrical action was found to have a peculiar quality, that of already being an elaboration, or doubling, of experience, that "as though" which makes any experience distinct even from itself. The entire project was characterized by a second-level reflexivity, given that the theatrical ac-

tion was in turn scrutinized in the course of deliberately set up moments of observation in which the voices of the educators alternated with those of the trainer and theatre specialist: these different accounts of the same actions enabled the participants to appreciate the richness underpinning not only the "transformation" naturally effected by theatrical action – a transformation of settings, roles, objects, bodies, gestures, intonations, etc. – but also transformation of the educational gaze by adopting the stance of one who seeks to describe).

Within such a framework, and given the project's educational design, the richness of theatrical work with children may be appreciated at three different levels.

The first concerns the fact that theatre makes it possible to explore reality in a different way to that conventionally proposed, specifically with greater emphasis on the role of imagination, emotions, the group, and a corporeality that not only consists of subjects' own bodies but also that of the "body" of objects and materials, used in unusual ways.

The second is the fact that theatre laboratories for children can be the object of educational research for educators and teachers, within a space of exchange created immediately after the workshop to enable true reflexivity on the educational process, in the here and now, based on naming the moods and contents perceived in the actual situation.

A third level concerns categories and systemization of the contents perceived during the observed experience: in this project, the observation notebooks and training sessions were used to repeatedly revisit the theatrical/educational experience with a view to refining the categories used to describe it, an exercise that once again invited participants to transform their perspective, and to constantly focus it on the self, the group and the transformative potential of language.

Involving the families of the children was one of the key actions in a project that aimed to introduce theatrical experience at the community level. This involvement however could not be realized without taking into account the specific situation of the community: each of the three local areas had different socioeconomic characteristics with different problems and resources. These differences were reflected in the decisions made by the individual education units concerning how to go about involving the parents.

In general, the laboratory may be defined as a space for experimenting with the language of theatre, in which two groups of protagonists from the school



community, parents and educators, had the opportunity to share an experience that bypassed their usual roles and functions: they were briefly exposed to the educational potential of theatre, to the fact that it offers adults valuable tools for working with children, for creating new educational alliances. Theatre was discovered to be an opportunity to look at and be looked at in a different way, from different perspectives, a language and an instrument for fostering a new kind of participation in the community. Thus, the laboratory became a space of encounter not only among different languages, but also among different cultural, educational and familial models.

The joint reflection of parents and educators brought to light not only different ways of doing theatre, but also different ways of speaking and thinking about it, and this became – just like in theatre games – a key moment of sharing in which it was possible to search for meaning, while leaving aside one's usual role, with both parties equally legitimized in drawing on their personal experience, another thinking practice that can foster a more intimate, informal and original sense of educational alliance.

The project contributed to enhanced parental participation at the end of year party, not in terms of numbers (attendance was already high), but in terms of a new role for parents: specifically, they took part in theatrical activities not as mere spectators, but as contributors to a shared narrative, at times spoken by the parents themselves, but in most cases presented by the children.

Finally, the design and implementation of the blog, a digital tool with the function of recording and preserving the memory of the different project actions, as well as the different reflections and the many images that accompanied it, provided a meaningful space not only in terms of offering opportunities for exchange and participation to all project participants, but also in terms of enabling the community approach adopted in this project to be reproduced. Hence, the blog was not limited to making visible and describing the execution of the different actions carried out, but also attempted to provide a preliminary account of the meanings uncovered, in the form of in-depth pedagogical documentation designed to become a source of ideas for developing “good practices”, even for those who did not take part in this project. Examples are the tools used to monitor and document the labs, the list of theatre activations divided by objective, the key words from the reflection sessions. We thus obtained a sort of unusual guide to conducting theatre labo-

ratories in early childhood education and preschool settings, one which does not identify methods, but outlines the prospects and possible directions for future good practices in keeping with the history of the local community and respectful of the educational background that is a component of that history.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This contribution is the result of a collective work. For academic purposes please note that: Francesca Antonacci has authored *The actors* and *Conclusions*; Monica Guerra has authored *The questions*, *The methodologies*, *The instruments*; Emanuela Mancino has authored *Introduction* and *The actions*.

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