



Creativity, Shared Meaning, and Relationships

By Carlina Rinaldi

The search for meaning begins from the moment of birth, from the child's first silent "why," and continues all through life. It is a difficult search. Young children make enormous efforts to put together often-disconnected fragments of experience to make sense of things. They persevere with their search stubbornly, tirelessly, making mistakes, and often on their own. But while engaged in this search, children ask us to share the search with them. We as teachers are asked by children to see them as scientists or philosophers searching to understand something, to draw out a meaning, to grasp a "piece of life," and to respect this search as a quality central to all human beings. We are asked to be the child's traveling companion in this search for meaning. We are also asked to respect the meanings that children produce, the explanatory theories they develop, and their attempts to find and give answers. When we honor children this way, the children reveal themselves to us: We come to know how they perceive, question, and interpret reality, and to understand their relationships with it.

I believe that teachers must communicate a willingness to assist children in their search for meaning in life. Two of the most important questions we have to ask ourselves as teachers are

- ❖ “How can we aid young children in their search for the meaning of things, and the meaning of life itself?”
- ❖ “How can we respond to their constant questions, their ‘whys’ and ‘hows,’ with eyes that don’t see them as helpless or unknowing, but rather with eyes that acknowledge the quest to learn and to know?”

The important thing for teachers to do to support the child’s quest is, first, to view the child as competent for the task and, second, to subjectively engage with the child in his or her pursuits. Look at children as avid seekers of meaning and significance and as producers of interpretive theories. Looking and listening with love, complicity, and openness allows teachers to understand what lies behind the child’s questions and theories.

The intention on the part of children to produce questions and search for answers is the genesis of creativity. The

behaviors that teachers exhibit toward the child’s intention to search, the process of searching, and the conclusions a child reaches either support or dampen creativity. The teacher’s job is to engage in a “relational creativity” with the child that both revels in the child’s creativity and stimulates the teacher’s own creativity to find ways to help the child observe, analyze, interpret, and build theories.

Sometimes these theories, these explanations that children produce, are wonderfully sweet: “It’s raining because the man on TV said it was going to rain,” or, “It’s raining because God is crying.” By honoring rather than correcting these answers, and by inventing ways to help the child pursue his questions further, a teacher does her part in the creative process. This often means slowing down and giving greater significance to the child’s stopping to study a flower for ten minutes, her enchantment with rain on a window, and her various wonderings than most adults might normally do. It takes time to produce interpretive theories and come up with answers. It takes time to study. This need for time must be respected.

Theory building also builds relationships because it is predicated on a search for

common meaning. Communication of theories between child and teacher or child and child transforms the young child's world from one that is intrinsically personal into one that is shared. The child sees his knowledge shared by another, and this sharing of theories is a key component of easing a child's feelings of uncertainty and solitude.

When teachers "open up" to children and really listen to the child's creations, not only in the physical sense but also in the metaphorical sense, they endorse creativity. They listen and give value to differences and make room for the points of view of others. Listening is the foundation of every learning relationship. Unfortunately, there are schools that do not listen in this way because they have a curriculum to follow and they try to correct "mistakes" immediately — to provide quick solutions to a problem and not give

children the time to find their own solutions. What gets lost is creativity.

Children are biologically predisposed to communicate and establish relationships; this is why we must always give them plentiful opportunities to represent their mental images and to be able to represent them to others. Teachers must realize not only that the other is indispensable to the child's developing sense of identity but also that learning with others generates pleasure in the group and makes the group become the place of learning. This, then, is the revolution that we have to put into place in child care. Through "relational creativity" children develop a natural sensitivity toward creating ideas, appreciate and codevelop ideas with others, and share common meaning. This is why I consider the learning process to be a creative process.

