



Chapter 13

The Pedagogy of Listening: The Listening Perspective from Reggio Emilia

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LISTENING AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Listening plays an important part in achieving an objective that has always characterized our experience in Reggio Emilia: the search for meaning. One of the first

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The photographs come from an experience, "Laura and the Watch," that appeared in "The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit and catalog. The original story took place in Arcobaleno Infant-Toddler Center in 1983, when Rinaldi was *pedagogista*.

questions we ask ourselves as educators is: "How can we help children find meaning in what they do, what they encounter, and what they experience? And how can we do this for ourselves?" In the search for meaning, we must ask: "Why?" "How?" and "What?" These are the key questions that children constantly ask, both in and out of school.

It is a difficult search, especially for children who have so many reference points in their daily lives: family, television, school, and the social places they frequent. Yet we cannot live without meaning, because that would leave our lives empty of identity, hope, or sense of the future. Children know this; they have the desire and the ability to search for the meaning of life and their own sense of self as soon as they are born. This is why we, in Reggio, view children as active, competent, and strong, exploring and finding meaning, not as predetermined, fragile, needy, and incapable.

For both adults and children, understanding means being able to develop an interpretive theory, a narrative that gives meaning to the world around them. For us, in Reggio, these theories are extremely important in revealing how children think, question, and interpret reality, and their own relationships with reality and with us. Expressing our theories to others transforms a world not intrinsically ours into something shared. Sharing theories is a response to uncertainty. This is the reason why any theory, to exist at all, needs to be expressed, communicated, and listened to. Herein lies the basis for the "pedagogy of relationships and listening" that distinguishes the work in Reggio Emilia. The capacity for reciprocal listening and expectation, which enables communication and dialogue, is a quality of the human mind and intelligence that is clearly present in young children. From the moment they are born, children develop this attitude of being part of the identity of others. The educators in Reggio have had the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between individual and group learning. We have learned the value of learning that is collective, collaborative, and democratic.

WHAT IS LISTENING?

- Listening should be sensitive to the patterns that connect us to others. Our understanding and our own being are a small part of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.
- Listening should be open and sensitive to the need to listen and be listened to and the need to listen with all our senses, not just with our ears.
- Listening should recognize the many languages, symbols, and codes that people use to express themselves and communicate.
- Listening to ourselves—"internal listening"—encourages us to listen to others but, in turn, is generated when others listen to us.
- Listening takes time. When you really listen, you get into the time of dialogue and interior reflection, an interior time that is made up of the present but also

past and future time and is therefore outside chronological time. It is a time full of silences.

- Listening is generated by curiosity, desire, doubt, and uncertainty. This is not insecurity but the reassurance that every "truth" is so only if we are aware of its limits and its possible falsification.
- Listening produces questions, not answers.
- Listening is emotion. It is generated by emotions; it is influenced by the emotions of others; and it stimulates emotions.
- Listening should welcome and be open to differences, recognizing the value of others' interpretations and points of view.
- Listening is an active verb, which involves giving an interpretation, giving meaning to the message, and valuing those who are listened to by others.
- Listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and a suspension of our judgments and prejudices. It requires openness to change. It demands that we value the unknown and overcome the feelings of emptiness and precariousness that we experience when our certainties are questioned.
- Listening removes the individual from anonymity (and children cannot bear to be anonymous). It legitimizes us and gives us visibility. It enriches both those who listen and those who produce the message.
- Listening is the basis for any learning relationship. Through action and reflection, learning takes shape in the mind of the subject and, through representation and exchange, becomes knowledge and skill.
- Listening takes place within a "listening context," where one learns to listen and narrate, and each individual feels legitimized to represent and offer interpretations of her or his theories through action, emotion, expression, and representation, using symbols and images (the "hundred languages"). Understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue.

Thus, the pedagogy of listening is not only a pedagogy for school but also an attitude for life. It can be a tool, but it can also be something more. It means taking responsibility for what we are sharing. If we need to be listened to, then listening is one of the most important attitudes for the identity of the human being, starting from the moment of birth. Before we are born, we live for 9 months in the body of our mothers. Therefore, we grow up as a listener surrounded by dialogue, and listening becomes a natural attitude that involves sensitivity to everything that connects us to others—not only to what we need to learn in school but also to what we need to live our lives. In fact, the most important gift that we can give to the children in the school and in the family is time, because time makes it possible to listen and be listened to by others.

It is also essential that we listen carefully to ourselves, to who we are and what we want. Sometimes we move so quickly through our lives, and we lose the courage of meeting ourselves. What are you doing? Where are you going? This courage to listen, this attention to what is inside ourselves, is a sort of interior listening and

reflection. Listening means being open to differences and recognizing the value of another's point of view and interpretation. Thus, listening becomes not only a pedagogical strategy but also a way of thinking and looking at others. Listening is an active verb that involves giving meaning and value to the perspectives of others, a form of assessment. This kind of listening is a way of welcoming others and their differences, and a way of welcoming different theories and perspectives.

Our way of listening means to be open to doubts and uncertainty. This listening means to be open to being in crisis, to accepting frustration. When I was in the United States, many, many teachers were worried because a child was in crisis, or they themselves were in crisis. It is not always bad to be in crisis, because it means that you are changing. The problem is, if you are not in crisis, it might be because you are not really listening to people around you. To be open to others means to have the courage to come into this room and say, "I hope to be different when I leave, not necessarily because I agree with you but because your thoughts have made me think differently." That is why documentation is so fascinating and so difficult to share. Documentation as visible listening can help you to understand and change your identity; it can invite you to reflect on your values. Listening also means welcoming uncertainty and living in the zone of proximal development. Only when I have doubts can I welcome others and have the courage to think that what I believe is not the truth but instead only my own point of view. I need the point of view of others to confirm or change my own point of view.

Real listening requires the suspension of judgments and prejudices. The relationship between peace and prejudice concerns the ability or disability to be good listeners. This is where education for peace begins. There is a connection with the pedagogy of listening. Peace is a way of thinking, learning, and listening to others, a way of looking at differences as an element of connection, not separation. Peace is a way of remembering that my point of view is not the best, and I need to hear and understand others' points of view. Here we find the roots of participation in the school as a place to encounter differences. We must have the courage to share and to agree or disagree. Listening provides the opportunity for professional and human development.

A "listening context" is created when individuals feel legitimized to represent their theories and offer their own interpretation of a particular question. We enrich our knowledge and our subjectivity by listening to others and being open to them when we learn as a group. When children are working together, each is developing his or her own process by learning from the processes of others. If you believe that others are a source of your learning, identity, and knowledge, you have opened an important door to the joy of being together. We are not separated by our differences but connected by them. It is because of my difference that I am useful to you because I offer another perspective. To learn as a group means to learn from the learning of others. This learning from others is visible not only because of documentation but also because there is a context of listening in which my theories are shared with others.

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CHILDREN AS LISTENERS

The capacity for listening and reciprocal expectation is an important quality, enabling communication and dialogue, and demands to be understood and supported. In fact, it abounds in young children, who are the greatest listeners to the world that surrounds them. They listen to life in all its shapes and colors. They listen to others—adults and peers. They quickly perceive how listening is essential for communication.

From the beginning, children demonstrate that they have a voice, that they know how to listen, and that they want others to listen to them. Sociability is not taught to children; they are naturally social beings. 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. Listening, therefore, seems to be an innate predisposition, present from birth, that supports children's process of socialization and acculturation. This is where the school comes in; it should first and foremost be a "context of multiple listening," involving the teachers and children, individually and as a group, who should listen to each other and themselves. This concept of a context of multiple listening overturns the traditional teaching-learning relationship. The focus shifts to learning—children's self-learning and the learning achieved by the group of children and adults together.

TEACHERS AS LISTENERS: THE PROCESS OF DOCUMENTATION

As children communicate their mental images or theories to others, they also represent them to themselves, developing a more conscious vision. This is what "internal listening" means. By moving from one language to another, and one field of experience to another, and by reflecting on these shifts, children modify and enrich their theories. Yet this is true only if children have the opportunity to make these shifts in a group context—with others—and if they have the chance 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 exchanging and comparing ideas. In this way, not only does the individual child learn how to learn, but also the group becomes conscious of itself as a "teaching place," where the languages are enriched, multiplied, refined, and generated, so that they collide and hybridize with one another and are renewed.

In addition to offering support and mediation to the children, the teacher who knows how to observe, document, and interpret these processes will realize his or her own full potential as a learner—in this case, learning how to teach. Documentation can be seen as visible listening: it ensures listening and being listened to by others. This means producing traces—such as notes, slides, and videos—to make

visible the ways the individuals and the group are learning. This ensures that the group and each child can observe themselves from an external viewpoint while they are learning (both during and after the process).

A broad range of documentation (videos, tape recordings, written notes, and so on) makes visible the learning processes and strategies used by each child, though always in a partial and subjective way. It also enables reading, revisiting, and assessing these actions to become integral to the knowledge-building process. Finally, it seems to be essential for meta-cognitive processes and for the understanding of both children and adults.

Observation, documentation, and interpretation are woven together into what I would define as a *spiral movement* in which none of these actions can be separated out from the others. It is impossible, in fact, to document without observing and interpreting. By means of documenting, the thinking or the interpretation of the documenter becomes tangible and capable of being interpreted. The notes, recordings, slides, and photographs represent fragments of a memory. Each fragment is imbued with the subjectivity of the documenter, but it is also subject to the interpretation of others, as part of a collective process of knowledge building. In these fragments lie the past and also the future (i.e., "What else could happen if . . ."). The result is knowledge that is bounteous, co-constructed, and enriched by the contributions of many.

Documentation, as we have developed in Reggio, does not mean to collect documents after the conclusion of experiences with children but during the course of these experiences. Traditionally, the recording and reading of memories take place at the end of an experience and may become part of a collection of archives. For us, documentation is part of the daily life in the schools. It is one of the ways in which we create and maintain the relationships and the experiences among our colleagues and the children. We think of documentation as an act of caring, an act of love and interaction. We believe that both the teachers and the children are learners. For us within the Reggio experience, documentation is an integral part of the learning and teaching process of the children and teachers. In the process of learning through documentation, we become aware of learning and its value; we assess it. Therefore, we believe that assessment is also an integral part of the learning and teaching process. We believe that the relationship between documentation and assessment is fundamental to our experience. This belief has not only completely changed our approach to documentation but has also helped us to understand the relationship between documentation and testing. We see more and more often the risk of considering testing as a tool of assessment. In reality, testing assesses only children's knowledge of the test's content, not the true learning of children.

Our interpretation of documentation has evolved from a fundamental question that we ask ourselves as teachers and educators. We don't have to teach them to ask "why" because inside each human being is the need to understand the reasons, the meaning of the world around us, and the meaning of our life. We believe that

it is important to try to reflect on the children's questions and understand *why* they are asking *why*. What are their connections? What are their reflections? *Why* do they ask this *why*? Children ask "why" not only when they speak directly but also through the hundred languages. There is a mix of practical and philosophical concerns in their questioning attitude, in their effort to understand the meaning of things and the meaning of life.

But children not only ask "why?" They are also able to find the answers to their whys and to create their own theories. One could ask why we, in Reggio, talk about *theory* and about *constructing theory*. Why, among many words, did we choose the word *theory*? Many people refer to theories only in the scientific realm of men like Galileo and Einstein. Can children build theory? If we accept the idea that our search, as human beings, to find the meaning of the world around us is essential to life, then we can accept that we can build the answers to our questions. We tend to build theory as a satisfactory explanation that can help us to understand the whys that are inside of us. We are inviting you, the reader, to think about this essential element that is expressed in the children, because the children themselves are one of the best expressions of our being human, when they create their own theories as satisfactory explanations. Observe and listen to children because when they ask "why?" they are not simply asking for the answers from you. They are requesting the courage to find a collection of possible answers.

Children also are better able to develop theories as satisfactory explanations that can be shared with the others as a point of view. A theory is much more than an idea. Theories must be pleasing and convincing. They must be useful and able to satisfy our intellectual and aesthetic needs. Theory is an expression of our point of view about things and about life. Because of this, theories need to be shared with the others not only to gain an ethical perspective but also to encounter an indispensable element for learning and understanding. The theories that the children can elaborate have to be shared with the others and communicated using all the languages that we know in order for them to exist. This is one of the roots of the pedagogy of listening and one of the roots of documentation as visible listening, beginning from the idea that the children are able to elaborate theories as explanations about life. This attitude must be preserved as essential for our development as human beings.

This attitude of the child means that the child is a real researcher. As human beings, we are all researchers of the meaning of life. Yet it is possible to destroy this attitude with our quick answers and our sense of certainty. How can we support and sustain this attitude of children toward constructing explanations? If a child says, "It's raining because God is crying," we could easily destroy his theory by telling him that it's actually because of the clouds. How can we cultivate this child's intentions to research? How can we cultivate the courage to create theories as explanations? In his childhood attitude, we can find the roots of creativity, the roots of philosophy, the roots of science, the roots of curiosity, and the roots



of ethics. In this childhood capacity to construct theories, we can observe the freedom to collect elements of ideas to put together in an original way. In this childhood search for answers, we see the roots of a philosophical attitude. This childhood habit of asking “why” is the only way to maintain what is essential in our life: curiosity. Humanity exists and endures because we have developed our capacity for curiosity. In the search for reasons and information lies the roots of doing what is right and good—that is, it is the foundation of ethics.



TEACHERS AS EVALUATORS: THE PROCESS OF ASSESSMENT

For us in Reggio, *making listening visible* means to be open to the theories of children. The elements of observation, interpretation, and documentation are strongly connected. It is impossible to observe without interpreting because observation is subjective. It is impossible to document without interpreting, and it is impossible

to interpret without reflecting and observing. When you choose something to document, when you take a photograph or videotape an experience, you are making a choice. That means that you are giving value or evaluating this experience as meaningful for the children's learning processes and for your own learning processes as well. When you document, you are sharing the children's learning and your own learning—what you understand, your perspective, and also what you value as meaningful. Within the word *evaluation*, there is the word *value*. Valuing means giving value to this learning context, and to certain experiences and interactions within that context. This is what we offer to the learning processes of the children and to those of our colleagues.

Here, in my opinion, is the genesis of *assessment* because, in producing the documentation, you make the element of value, as well as the indicators you have applied, visible and sharable. From your documentation, the children can understand not only their processes but what you value as meaningful for their learning processes. In this way, assessment becomes more democratic. Thus, the children can see the meaning that the teacher has drawn from their work. When you share your documentation with the children, you demonstrate that what they do has value and meaning. The children discover that they exist and can emerge from anonymity and invisibility, seeing that what they say and do is important, that it can be heard, valued, shared, appreciated, and understood.

Therefore, you cannot document without assessing. Assessment becomes part of the learning processes as you become aware of your choices and your values, as you come to understand your ethics. When you enter our schools and your own schools, perhaps what you see documented are not only experiences but values—in other words, things that the members of the learning community have assessed and valued as important. For instance, if we want to create a school for education, and not a school for instruction and information, then we can hope that education for peace also begins from the moment of birth. Education for peace is a way of thinking about the others and the world, a way of looking at the reality as the children do, without prejudice. Children can teach us because they welcome everything. They can teach us how to be open to others and to their differences. They can teach us to be open to understanding that we are extraordinary because we are unique, because we are different. Listening is a metaphor of encounter and dialogue. Because we believe in the pedagogy of listening, the experience in Reggio tries to honor the children by listening to that expression of the human being. Perhaps the pedagogy of listening may be a pedagogy for supporting a way of living with the hope that it is possible for human beings to change.

Children feel that we value what they say, and therefore what they think, because we record it, transcribe it, and reflect on what it might mean. The children know that we seek for indications connected with the processes of research and learning that they are experiencing. Above all, they feel that by giving value to their thoughts, we give value to them as unique individuals who are saying something important; they feel how important they are to us. From very early on,

children understand that drawing is not merely a way to kill time but gives witness to a thought, an emotion, a way of knowing that might indicate the direction of their processes of knowing and therefore of expressing. This happens because teachers place much value on the children's drawings. The children also recognize themselves in photographs and videos and realize what was happening to them or their group of friends with regard to both actions and emotions. They recognize the efforts they make in discussing their respective points of view and understand the value that cooperation has within the group. They become aware that they are contributing different opinions, sustaining their own ideas, but at the same time participating in constructing a joint result. Children thus feel that each one of them is valuable and competent. At the same time, they appreciate that the knowledge they have constructed together acquires an added value because it is a shared result and has deep meaning related to how education builds community.

Beyond what they come to feel about themselves, through the listening process, children also recognize that each trace of their processes of learning and development is welcomed. This happens across the different fields of knowledge, for example, with respect to their first letters that appear mixed in their drawings, their first written numbers that indicate measurements of the table they want their parents to build for them, or their beginning attempts at music produced with the instruments they have available, which is then recorded and listened to as a musical exploration or as background to their daily activity. Each of these signs of learning is welcome as precious and is supported with new materials and activities that provide possibilities for further meaning, either replicating the experiences or expanding them into new contexts. What they are learning becomes evident to them because teachers give value to their processes of learning about letters, numbers, music, and other subjects of knowledge and make them visible in their daily teaching.

Children feel emotion and participate with passion and barely concealed pride when they see images of these learning processes displayed in their classroom, collected in a publication, or organized in a video or digital presentation. Those products will be shown and shared with other teachers or with parents at the regular class meeting. Self-esteem and appreciation from others, along with the perception of being an essential part of the community, become things of value not only declared as abstract objectives but also as experiences rendered palpable and manifest in the concrete actions, lived in everyday space and time.

A learning community thus takes shape. It involves the teachers who learn that their way of looking bestows value and who therefore develop a deep sense of responsibility and reciprocity. Beyond the teachers, however, it also involves the parents. To parents, their own son or daughter is important not only as a child but also as an individual with a certain kind of personality or a specific way of learning. That child needs and has a right to times and spaces, friends, and materials and strategies that are personalized as much as possible. Yet the parents also discover that although their son or daughter is unique, that child has within himself

or herself the rights of all the children in that community. They learn that to do something for their own son or daughter means to do something for all the children. From the concept of "my son" or "my daughter," the parents easily develop a concept of the children of "our school" and "their rights."

Through meeting other parents and reflecting on ways of knowing, playing, and being together with other children, the parents open up to dialogue about the diverse ways to deal with common problems and about styles of informal education that individuals adopt in relation to each of their sons and daughters. The educating community is a community that gives value to the rights of everyone.

This learning community is therefore an ethical and democratic community. It possesses the democracy of the communal construction of knowledge and of values that inspire and motivate that knowledge and that can strongly, through documentation, communicate with the wider community in which the school is placed.

On the basis of such a foundation, documentation that begins in schools for young children evolves into something that moves beyond them, in the form of an exhibit perhaps or books, opening up debates that speak not only a verbal language but also the language of images and more. We speak of the "hundred languages" through which the children communicate and discover pathways to the new and unexpected, to the courage that education asks for and then proposes—the courage of values that we want to construct together with our children, values that accept the challenge of contemporary life and the richness of change.

TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS: EDUCATION AS LIFE

When teachers make listening and documentation central to their practice, they transform themselves into *researchers*. Why is the concept of "teacher as researcher" so important? Why, among the many possibilities, do we emphasize the qualification of "researcher"? Research is a word with many meanings that can evoke laboratories, chemical formulas, and science. It generally represents a clear and recognized methodology and implies objectivity. The word research has a serious tone and tends to be reserved for the few people who work in relationship with certain established and conventional procedures. It is a concept that inhabits universities or specialized centers for research. It is a word that does not circulate in the streets and squares of the city. Research is not a word with common usage, and above all, it is not a concept that we normally think about putting into practice in our daily lives.

In schools, the word research usually means to gather a collection of information and compile what is already known about a certain topic. Emotions and experiences that characterize so-called scientific research, such as curiosity, doubt, the unknown, error, crisis, theory, and confusion, are not usually part of school work or daily life. If they do enter into the context of life in the school, they are viewed as weak moments, moments of fragility, of uncertainty, that must be quickly overcome.

In my opinion, this is why true innovations are so difficult to accept and appreciate. They shake up our frames of reference because they force us to look at the world through new eyes. They open us up to what is different and unexpected. All too often, we human beings tend to accept things as they are, the status quo, what we know and have already tried out, even when we are not satisfied, even when that makes us feel stressed, confused, and hopeless. So, in this way, we try to defend our normality, the norms and rules we already know, to the detriment of the new. Yet only searching and researching are guaranteed to lead us to that which is new, that which moves us forward. In contrast, the status quo of normality excludes research as the approach to be used everyday and therefore excludes doubt, error, uncertainty, curiosity, marvel, and amazement as important values in our daily lives. The preference for the status quo places normality in opposition to research. Instead, I would like to propose the concept of the "normality of research," which defines research as an attitude and an approach in everyday living—not only in schools but also outside of them—as a way of thinking for ourselves and thinking jointly with others, a way of relating with other people, with the world around us, and with life.

Where and how can we find the strength and courage for this radical change? Once again, we must start with the children. The young child is the first great researcher. Children are born searching for and therefore researching the meaning of life, the meaning of the self in relation to others and to the world. Children are born searching for the meaning of their existence; the meaning of the conventions, customs, and habits we have; and of the rules and the answers we provide.

Children's questions (such as, "Why are we born?" and "Why do we die?") are precious, as are their answers, because they are generative. Children's theories (such as, "The sea is born from the mother wave" and "When you die, you go into the belly of death and then get born again") highlight the strongest characteristic of the identity of children and of humankind: searching for and researching meaning, sharing and constructing together the meaning of the world and the events of life. All children are intelligent, different from each other, and unpredictable. If we know how to listen to them, children can give back to us the pleasure of amazement, marvel, doubt, and the "why." Children can give us the *strength of doubt* and the *courage of error*, of the unknown. They can transmit to us the joy of searching and researching, the value of research, as well the openness toward others and toward everything new that is produced by the encounter with others.

These concepts give strength to the notion of education and personal formation as an ongoing process of research. They are also at the root of the value of documentation and of making listening visible, which is not simply a technique that can be transported but a way of guaranteeing that our thinking always involves reflection, exchange, different points of view, and differences in assessment or evaluation. They are seen not only as didactic strategies but also as values that inspire our view of the world. The documentation materials we use attest not only to our path of knowledge regarding children but also to our path of knowledge

about the child and humanity, and about ourselves. They also attest to our idea of the teacher as researcher, of school as a place of research and cultural elaboration, a place of participation, in a process of shared construction of values and meanings. The school of research is a school of participation.

Moreover, this concept of the normality of research is the best way to express what I believe is one of the particular aspects of our experience, one of the most topical "cultural knots" in these complex times: the relationship between theory and practice. Theory and practice, considered as a dichotomy that has weighed heavily on the world of school and on our culture, could find a true dialectic and synthesis in this concept of research in which theory generates practice that, in turn, generates new theories and new perspectives on the world. The theories come from the practice but also orient and guide it. The theories are practical thoughts. My theories produce my interpretations of reality. This is why theories should be continuously questioned and verified in an exchange with others.

When we say that school is not a preparation for life but *is* life, this means assuming the responsibility to create a context in which words such as *creativity*, *change*, *innovation*, *error*, *doubt*, and *uncertainty*, when used on a daily basis, can truly be developed and become real. This means creating a context in which the teaching-learning relationship is highly evolved—that is, where the solution to certain problems leads to the emergence of new questions, new expectations, and new changes. This also means creating a context in which children, from a very young age, discover that there are problems that are not easily resolved, that perhaps cannot have an answer, and for this reason, they are the most wonderful ones because therein lies the "spirit of research." Even though the children are very young, we should not convey to them the conviction that for every question, there is a right answer. If we did so, perhaps we would appear to be more important in their eyes and they might feel more secure, but they would pay for this security by losing the "pleasure of research," the pleasure of searching for answers and constructing the answers with the help of others. Children are capable of loving and appreciating us even when we appear to be doubtful or we do not know how to answer, because they appreciate the fact that we are right there by their side in their search for answers: the child-researcher and the teacher-researcher. Only in this way will children return with full rights among the builders of human culture and the culture of humanity. Only in this way will they sense that their wonder and their discoveries are truly appreciated because they are useful. Only in this way can children and childhood hope to reacquire their human dignity and no longer be considered "objects of care" or "objects of cruelty and abuse," both physical and moral. Life is research.