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My Nose is as Full as a World: *Exploring the Smells of the City* By Daniela Lanzi and Mirca Neroni

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Daniela Lanzi is a pedagoga (education coordinator) and a member of the pedagogical team of the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia in Reggio Emilia. Mirca Neroni is the atelierista (studio teacher) at Balducci Preschool. This article is based on a presentation during a session of the 2004 international study tour, titled "The Town of Reggio Emilia, Its Community and Its Context: Experiences of Participation and Projects in Evolution." In addition to Daniela and Mirca, Paola Cavazzoni (pedagoga, Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia) and Alexander Scillitani (film director) participated in this presentation. During the 2004 International Conference in Reggio, "Crossing Boundaries: Narrating the Possible," a related session titled, "Town In Waiting" was one of 11 concurrent sessions that took place in different places in the town. The contributors to that session were: Andrea Branzi (architect and designer, associate professor, Faculty of Industrial Design, Politecnico di Milano), Mara Davoli (atelierista, Neruda preschool), Tiziana Filippini (pedagogical coordinator, Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia), Annalia Galardini (director of Education, Social Services and Cultural Affairs, Comune di Pistoia), Amelia Gambetti (Reggio Children coordinator, Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia board member), Lorena Lucenti (teacher, Panda infant-toddler center), Evelina Reverberi (teacher, Diana preschool), Mirella Ruozi (atelierista, Laboratorio G. Rodari), Denis Santachiara (designer) and Milena Zanti (teacher, Balducci preschool). The editors of Innovations would like to thank the translator, Jane McCall, for her contribution to the publication of this article.

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La Citta in Attesa/The City in Waiting

During the 2001-2002 school year, all of the Reggio municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools participated in a project called "La Citta in Attesa" or "The City in Waiting." The project arose when the city decided to celebrate the 30-year anniversary of the publication of Gianni Rodari's book, *The Grammar of Fantasy*, which he had dedicated to the city of Reggio Emilia. The city wanted to pay homage to Gianni Rodari, who had written the book while he was visiting Reggio Emilia in 1972, encountering and meeting with children, parents and teachers from the municipal infant-toddler center and preschools. In this book, Rodari explores values cherished by the Reggio educators, such as aesthetic pleasure, transformation, creativity, marvel, joy and a sense of humor. We believe that all of these qualities contribute to knowledge building in children and adults.

In the course of this project, the educators in Reggio Emilia decided to reflect on the value of these key words with our present day teachers and our young children. The ideas of creativity and transformation are not new to our schools. These values have been key to our experience from the very beginning but we wanted to raise our awareness of how these factors related to our work in different processes at the present time. We also wanted to create a closer relationship between creativity, transformation and the city itself, as a physical entity. We asked ourselves a question: In their encounter with the city, how do

children and adults observe in ways that that are transformational, metaphoric and creative? We tried to consider the city as a kind of enormous workshop where we could carry out projects, where modification and changes could be made . . . a workshop that would welcome the suggestions of children and adults. In our educational project as a network of schools, there has always been a strong dialogue between our work in the schools and the city itself. The school and the city are in a dynamic relationship, in which children and adults are not just part of the relationship but also an expression of the city. The reflections and manifestations of our project were made visible in a final exhibition on May 12, 2002, and became a concrete way of seeing our project and the way it had developed. There was a tangible effect on the city, which everyone could see and investigate, and which declared the identity of the school and the children.

During this long-term investigation, there were three places inside the city that were transformed by the children's thinking and way of seeing. These were the public park (near the Municipal Theater), vicolo Trivelli (a very narrow street on the way to the city center) and via Farini (the street that connects the main square of the city near City Hall with another large space near the public library, via Garibaldi). The encounter of the children with the city was made visible in May 2002 through installations in these three places, which included the reflections of the children and actual concrete objects that the children

provocation

not a fixed project

motivation for project/ reserach

intention

We tried to consider the city as a kind of enormous workshop where we could carry out projects, where modification and changes could be made . . . a workshop that would welcome the suggestions of children and adults. -Daniela Lanzi

had created. So the city was waiting that day, not just for those who traverse its streets, for whom the city waits every day. The city was also waiting for the transformation of the city by the children. The city knew that projects had been taking place in its streets for months and months, that the children had been investigating areas of the city for a long time, and that the thoughts of the children and the adults would be made manifest on that day. The thoughts and ideas of the children are very important because they remind us that we are not only interested in the final results of a project, but also in all the variations and stages of the process that take place.

There were many long-term projects that resulted from encounters between the children and via Farini in various infant-toddler centers and preschools. The way the children encountered via Farini offered a new way of looking and experiencing the street. As a result of this way of looking at the street, we arrived at the realization that beauty, aesthetics and caring for the place where we live are important parts of recognizing our citizenship and our belonging to a place. We tried to concentrate on what possibilities the street might offer to the children. We knew that the pathways of this project were to be made visible at the end of the year. When we explored the streets with the children, we thought about how we might be able to make the children's explorations visible. The expectations and imaginings of the teachers for these experiences on via Farini were far inferior to what was elaborated by the children. Experiencing via Farini with the children transformed the way that we saw the street.

In the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, the teachers use many forms of note taking during the course of a project, in order to document the children's hypotheses, which are expressed through words and graphic representation. These writings have a very changeable nature and are useful when teachers want to make their own predictions about what might happen next in a project. They are also useful for defining the central issues of an exploration. The material collected during the course of our investigations is regularly discussed as the project evolves, in order to exchange different points of view. These discussions are used as opportunities for professional development with the teachers but the parents and children also participate in dialogues of this kind. In this case, the material collected was also the topic of

discussion groups among educators of the 12 infant-toddler centers and preschools that participated in the via Farini experience.

It is very important for us to have these different occasions for debating and discussing the material because of the opportunities they offer for changing points of view and for changing strategies during the course of our ongoing projects. It is important to have material to discuss together because we have to make a lot of choices about what we want to use to make our learning visible to other people. Very often, teachers must ask themselves the question: What do we want to choose, among all of these different possibilities, to inquire into more deeply and to investigate together with the children? Questions like this belong to the profession of teachers; they are part of our job. In our opinion, this question may be one of the most difficult: Do our choices enable others to follow the learning process of the children and the adults together?

"My Nose is as Full as a World"

The four and five year old children of the Balducci Preschool were the protagonists or central figures in an exploration of via Farini we have titled, "My Nose is as Full as a World." This research project sought to discover how cities could be explored by the children's gaze, by their hypotheses, their words and suggestions. In *Reggio Tutta: The Guide to the City*, Sandra Piccinini (president, *Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia*) wrote, "For the children, the map of 'all Reggio' is one you can touch, smell, taste and traverse in the different rhythms of running and walking, 'on the tip of your toe' . . . For the children, the city is, above all, an existential place where one's own identity is developed in a relational experience with objects and with other people."

The relationship between the children and the city has always been discussed inside our schools for the richness, the complexity and the possibilities of inquiry that it offers. This relationship highlights the networking nature of all the schools inside the city. Our encounter with via Farini began with a conversation regarding the children's outings in the city with their parents:

I go into the city with my parents and we get bread when we don't have any at home.

When I am in the big square in the town, I buy a sweet pastry with cream inside it.

using
doc/
debate/
choices

making
choices

intention

process

intention

documenta
tion

It is quite common for a project in our schools to have its genesis with a conversation. We have tried over the years to use conversations to interpret ways of building knowledge and not only to find out who knows what. We also think that conversation has a political value. It isn't only a good technique for improving the ability to communicate. It is also a way of offering the children tools for accessing a greater participation in the life of the city.

We continued our dialogue with an inquiry, in verbal and graphic form, into the meaning of the word "via" or "street." The street was the context, in which the children were going to carry out their inquiry. The teachers decided to respond to a reflection that the children had made. The adults asked themselves this question: Is this type of initial inquiry, using words and using drawings, the most meaningful way that we can begin a project with the children? In this specific case, is it the most meaningful way to begin a project about the city?

The teachers asked the children:

What is a street?

What are streets for?

Do they have a name?

The children responded:

Streets are roads that have a name.

Streets need names to be recognized but they're named for very old, important people who are dead now or very good inventors.

Streets are very long roads.

A street is a small narrow road where there are houses and gates.

Some streets are made straight and some with bends.

Our street has its own name. Its name is via Farini.

Then the teachers asked other questions:

Do you know via Farini?

Why do you think it has this name?

The children responded:

You know, my mommy goes to have coffee in via Farini. Yes, near where the lion square is.

It's called the same as flour [farina]. There might be

some flour. There might be some cooks making flour. There are probably some mills, too, for making flour. Via Farini? I recognized it right away because I've been down there lots of times with mommy when I go into the city center.

The project began to take a concrete form with the first outings by the children into the street. Their ways of observing enabled them to construct different ways of imagining, to explore the urban landscape using all their senses. During the research pathway the children chose, they gave us multi-sensorial ways of understanding and interpreting the street. Looking at the gestures, at the ways of seeing and at the words that the children used, the adults began to try and construct an interpretation of the children's ways of exploring the street.

provocation

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It isn't only a good technique for improving the ability to communicate.

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-Mirca Neroni

The teachers organized the children's reflections while investigating the street according to several indicators:

process

• **spatial orientation and personal knowledge**

If you turn 'round that way, you can see the piazza with all the pigeons in it.

This is via Farini. Look, there are old houses in the street and there's the bend down there at the end, too.

Look, there is the sign, which says "via Farini."

• **unusual ways of looking and seeing**

There are windows in the street but nobody's behind

them. They're made of iron, these windows, and you can smell spiders and spiders' webs.

- **road surfaces**

It's shining! They come awake! Look, there's gold and there's silver!

There's such strange types of tiles on the floor with a very hard, hard sand in between them.

- **paths for play**

The sidewalk [footpath] is made of bricks. You put your feet on it. It's made up of feet and marching. It's somebody who's marching along the street. Charge!

- **color features**

It's all different colors. It's red; it's orange. What they wanted to do is make a city with all colors in it.

- **characteristics of smell**

Mmm, smell that! Smell that perfume of vanilla!

I can smell foam. I can smell cake. Mmm, little cakes with jam inside them.

It's a bar! Can you smell the coffee? Can you smell the cappuccino? This makes me hungry!

I can smell the truck going past. It was a horrible smell.

I can smell a beautiful smell. I can smell lemon and chamomile.

In these first outings together with the children, there were many different paths we could have chosen to take. But we felt that the idea that characterized the children's outings most strongly was the children's interpretation of the street through their sense of smell. So we, as teachers, chose this focus for exploring the street with the children. Why did we make this choice? Besides the strong suggestions of the children, we also liked the challenge of exploring in a way that was not very common to our experience in the school. We believed the olfactory features of the street offered us a possibility for creating new contexts for exploration and interpretation. We also believed that the idea of smell is related to knowledge and knowledge building. A sense of smell is something we have from the day we are born. It offers us a holistic way of interpreting the world. In his book, *Il Profumo*, Patrick Suskind says of a child, "He woke up first with his nose. His little nose moved, stretched upwards and smelled. It was as if the child could see with his nostrils, as if he were looking carefully and inquisitively, in a more penetrating way than he could have done with his eyes. As if, with his nose, he was devouring something coming from himself. He was smelling himself."

At this point, the hypotheses that the children had formulated suggested that we begin to think about the street in a more complex way, to look at smells in a wider context, and to try and trace some first biographical notes regarding the children's thoughts about the sense of smell.

Smell as a dimension to explore and discover.

You can never see a smell. It's light and the air carries it away.

You can't see a smell but you can smell it.

My nose is as full as a world!

Smell as a code for knowledge, which together with the other senses, helps us to reconstruct the complexity of knowledge. Smell as a system of relations, which gives identity back to things, to people and to places.

Everything has its own smell. But light and glass can't have a smell. They don't smell of anything.

Riccardo is different because he has the smell of his skin.

You can tell it's via Farini by the smell and you can smell it before you get to the street.

This code for recognizing places through smell allows the children to begin to develop an olfactory map for recognizing places. In this way, the children declared how smell can be used as a code for knowledge and for learning.

A nose is something you use for breathing. Smells and perfumes go into your nose. Then they go into your tummy and they come out through your navel.

Sometimes they come out of your mouth or go in through your mouth. They go everywhere, smells.

I can feel smells inside me. Smells don't come out because the skin holds them in near to my bones.

The smell goes into your nose, up to your brain and then it tells you the answers to things.

We have to suck in with our noses.

What if we go into via Farini and capture all the smells?

The children once again encountered the olfactory qualities of the street when we returned to via Farini to capture old smells. We wanted to capture the smells in order to get to know them better. This close, interwoven dialogue between the children and the world of smells began with the assumption that smells are unstable and provisional, very difficult to capture and especially difficult to hold. It is from this premise about smells that the children germinated different hypotheses. Through discussion of the various possibilities

Text

together, the children's ideas entered into relationship and contributed to a common, shared strategy.

To capture the smells, we can make a sack.

We need a floppy, big nose to capture the smells.

Or we could take a bottle, put the bottle where we smelled the smell, capture the smell in the bottle and then close it with a cork.

I think we need some transparent tools with handles on them. Then we'll throw them up high to capture the perfume smells.

We need a Hoover!

Let's prepare a smell-capturing machine!

This idea was instantly a winner, one in which the children wanted to participate. They decided to invent

and create machines for capturing and transforming smells.

Let's make a machine for capturing and transforming smells!

We don't want to have these fake ideas of what we can do! We'll never be able to capture smells!

But you can, you can! You get something that sucks up the smells!

Yeah, then the machine would explode with all those smells inside it.

No, because we'll make it big!

If you make it too big, you'll break the road into pieces.

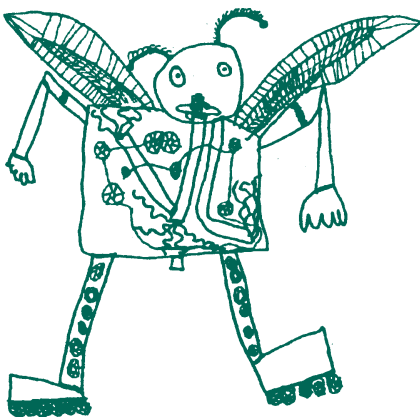
The people living on via Farini will get very angry if the smells disappear from their street.

The children created designs for a machine that would capture and transform the smells.

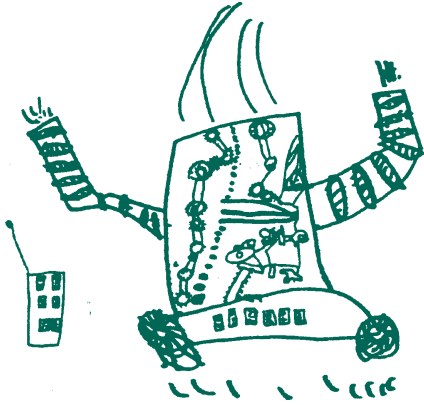


I'm going to make it in the shape of a truck with a tube, which breathes in. I'm going to make the tube a round spiral with a spring inside it. And then I'm going to give it an antenna that communicates with a sound, which makes a signal: Beep, beep, beep, beep. This sound means that the machine has found a smell and is sucking it in.

There are two tubes. One for nice smells and one for bad smells. After the machine has captured the smells, the machine will throw them back into the city. But only the nice smells will come back in our city. The horrible smells will be transported into another city.

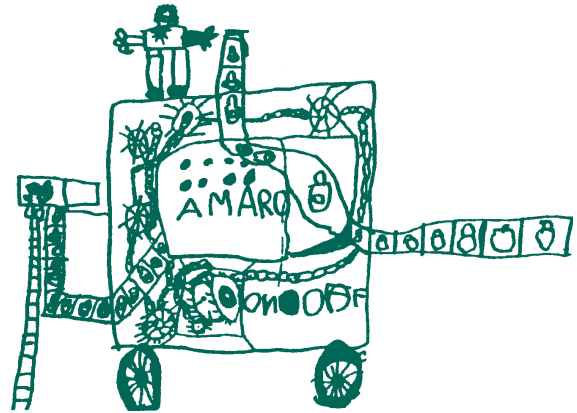


I want to put some wheels on my machine so it can go into the city. I want to put a seat inside it so you can ride inside the machine and drive it. In the tummy of the machine, I'm going to put a big cage to hold all the smells inside.



I would like to build a machine made out of iron with wings and four wheels. This machine catches smells, then it goes into museums and lets you smell good smells and bad smells. They will even come from America and from all the countries in the world to smell our smells.

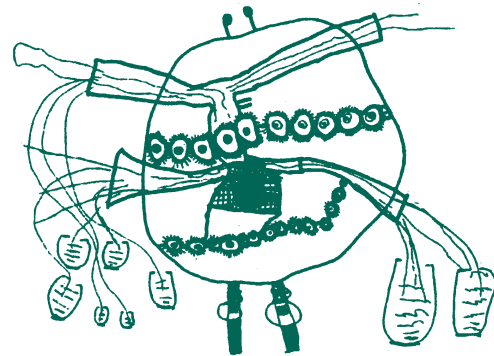
The smells go into small jars and are not mixed, otherwise a smell that doesn't exist will come out and the machine will blow up . . . then there is a monitor that tells what the smell is: if it's bitter, sharp, sweet . . .



A tube that goes into lots of other tubes, and after goes to the final tube where there is a box where the smells go. The box has a round cork and after there's a button, you push the button and then it closes.



It has two legs that hold it still, that way it doesn't go away. It has two antennas that are used to turn the buttons on and off. To catch a lot of the different scents, I filled up eight bags.



provocation

The teachers decided to fill small jars with substances that had different essences and smells. The intention was to offer the children a pause for thought and reflection. We wanted to give back to the children a palette of smells, which they had evoked through their words while discussing their encounter with *via Farini*. The teachers encouraged the children to try to understand the special characteristics of the smell as well as the elements that make up the smell. We wanted them to talk about what the smell reminds them of and what comes to mind when they smell it.

parents...

In the entrance to our school, we set up a "smelling area" to offer visitors to the school, parents and grandparents, the opportunity to participate in our

inquiry. Part of the children's learning pathway with the smells included their desire to represent the smells in a graphic way, through their drawings. The teachers asked:

*What smells would we like to draw from via Farini?
Is it possible to draw a smell?*

We felt that drawing might be a strategy that would give the children a way of forming a concrete elaboration around something that is invisible and intangible. The children decided to graphically represent the smells that occurred most frequently in their explorations. Together, the children listed adjectives that describe these smells.

The smell of coffee is:

<i>hard</i>	<i>subtle</i>	<i>disgusting</i>
<i>strong</i>	<i>warm</i>	<i>amazing</i>
<i>bitter</i>	<i>a little bit burnt</i>	
<i>sour</i>	<i>tasty</i>	

The nasty smell of cigarettes is:

<i>bothersome</i>	<i>horrible</i>	
<i>nasty</i>	<i>rotten</i>	
<i>black</i>	<i>long</i>	
<i>stinky</i>	<i>dirty</i>	
<i>soggy</i>	<i>It makes you sneeze and it makes</i>	
<i>a little bit bitter</i>	<i>you a little bit sleepy.</i>	

The nice smell of cookies is:

<i>delicious</i>	<i>dripping</i>	
<i>soft</i>	<i>exquisite</i>	
<i>appetizing</i>	<i>smooth</i>	
<i>light</i>	<i>open</i>	
<i>good</i>	<i>My nose is lighting up!</i>	
<i>sweetish</i>		

The lovely smell of flowers is:

<i>transparent</i>	<i>light</i>	<i>sweet</i>
<i>delicate</i>	<i>very wet</i>	<i>full of colors</i>
<i>lovely</i>	<i>round</i>	

I capture the smell with my nose. Then it went into my brain and made me feel happy.

The idea of smell that the children gave us was one that can be captured and represented, and one that is livable. The teachers wondered: How can we give a shape to the children's thoughts and to their ideas? At this point, the inquiry and exploration of the children and the adults became closely interwoven. The teachers "loaned" the children ideas, materials and, also, their hands. We often use the strategy of offering our assistance, in the form of our thoughts and skills, or actual tools and materials, at times when we feel our intervention might be useful for the learning processes of the children. This loan can help the children make their ideas visible. We know that the assistance that we give to the children will be "returned" through their regained momentum, achieved progress or acquired knowledge.

A small group of children decided to embark on a design project for a large cylinder that we called an "olfactometer." One of the desired features of this

cylinder was the ability to hold inside or make visible the characteristics of smells that the children had described: the smell of coffee, cigarettes, cookies and flowers. A long strip of paper was prepared, listing all of the adjectives the children had used to refer to these four smells and it was placed on the outside of the cylinder. The children also wanted to include the idea of transparency in the cylinder design so that you could see the smell while smelling the smell. The children's proposal of combining material and smells in the olfactometer gave a more tangible form to the suggestions they had around the idea of smells.

We presented the olfactometer to the entire class in order to collect comments and evaluations from the other children about whether this olfactometer really does its job. critique

It's a smell that you can smell.

It's a smell that you can see.

It's a smell, which tells a story.

It's a smell, which tells a story and has its own memory.

We also created gifts for the parents in the form of four different posters with individual drawings of the different smells the children felt characterized via Farini: coffee, cigarettes, cookies and flowers. The material we collected during this exploration of via Farini was organized into folders. One folder was especially dedicated to the words of the children and to their drawings. Another folder was kept for photographic material of the outings to the street, and of the discussions and elaborations inside the school. Another folder was kept for the materials that all the adults, teachers and parents, were able to collect on the subject of smells. folders! org

On May 12, 2002, our investigation of via Farini, along with those of all the infant-toddler centers and preschools, were made visible in the city through the transformations of the children. Our olfactometer was a part of this transformational experience. We decided to call this initiative "*La Citta in Attesa*," because it means (in Italian, it is a play on words) "the city was waiting for the unexpected."

Some of the children's reflections about this experience:

There were some little holes with noses drawn on them so children could play at putting their noses in the holes and smelling the smells. They did it because they thought it was a fun thing to do.

I can smell smells that I had never smelled before. And I recognized them by smelling them.

doc

loan of knowledge (smell tubes)